Asari Endou
Illustration by
Marui-no
10
PEACEFUL DAYS OF
16 MAGICAL GIRLS
Magical Girl
Raising Project

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Asari Endou

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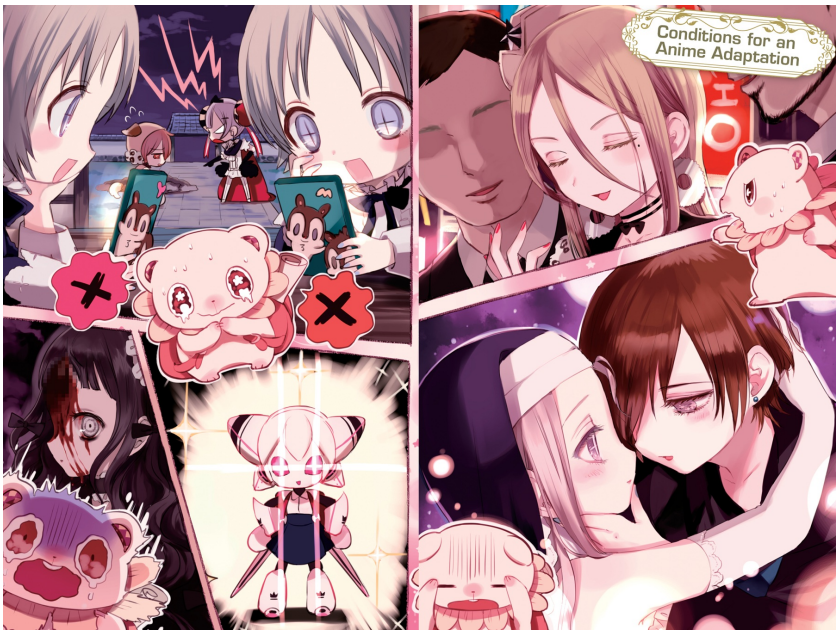
Conditions for an Anime Adaptation

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Illustration by Marui-no
Design by Afterglow

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Asari Endou

Translation by Jennifer Ward
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Afterword
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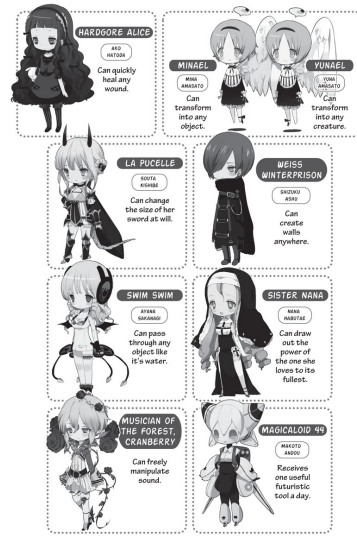
SNOW WHITE
KOYUKI HIMEGAWA
Can hear the thoughts of those in need.
RULER
SAKAE MOKUGU
Can order those directly in front of her to do anything.
RIPPLE
KANO SAZANAMI
Can throw shuriken that always hit their target.
TAMA
TAMA INUBOUZAKI
Can quickly open holes in anything.
CALAMITY MARY
NAOKO YAMAMOTO
Can power up the weapons she wields.
NEMURIN
NEMU GANZOU
Can enter others' dreams.
TOP SPEED
TSUBAME MUROTA
Uses a broomstick to fly at high speed.
Introducing the magical girls, pon!


HARDCORE ALICE
AKO HATTORI
Can quickly heal any wound.
MINAEL
MINA AMEMIYA
Can transform into any object.
YUNAEL
YUNA AMEMIYA
Can transform into any creature.
LA PUCELLE
SOUTA KISHIBE
Can change the size of her sword at will.
WEISS WINTERPRISON
SHIZUKU ASHU
Can create walls anywhere.
SWIM SWIM
AYANA SAKAMAGI
Can pass through any object like it's water.
SISTER NANA
NANA HABUTAE
Can draw out the power of the one she loves to its fullest.
MUSICIAN OF THE FOREST, CRANBERRY
Can freely manipulate sound.
MAGICALOID 44
MAKOTO ANDOU
Receives one useful futuristic tool a day.

CHARACTERS

WHAT IS THE SPOILER-O-METER?

The title page for each story in this book includes a "Spoiler-o-meter" for those of you who are still watching the anime and want to **avoid spoilers**. The meter indicates **which episode of the anime you should watch up to so that you can enjoy each story without getting spoiled**.

We hope this will be helpful when reading this book.

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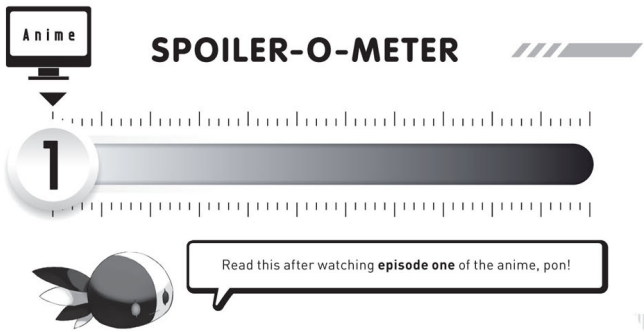
The Lady Knight's Lonely Battle: Director's Cut

This story is set shortly before the magical candy competition begins.



The Lady Knight's Lonely Battle: Director's Cut

☆ **La Pucelle**

For about a month now, La Pucelle had been trying her best to train herself mentally.

She would exhale all the air from her lungs, then take a long breath in to fill them back up and then some. Before beginning magical-girl activities, she would use the ten minutes before Snow White's arrival to climb the steel tower, cross her legs atop a girder, and immerse herself in her own world. *Form is emptiness, emptiness is form…form is emptiness, emptiness is form*, she would chant endlessly, attempting to make her mind as blank as what she saw under her eyelids.

The reason La Pucelle had taken such a keen interest in meditation: Snow White.

Snow White's magic enabled her to hear the inner voices of people in trouble. Just as ears and eardrums will catch on sounds you didn't mean to hear, Snow White's magic would always hear the cries of a troubled heart. And her magic worked not only on humans, but also on magical girls.

What was worse, La Pucelle was the transformed alter ego of the teen boy Souta Kishibe. And there is no member of *Homo sapiens* more prurient than a middle school boy. Be he a class rep of irreproachable conduct, a charming member of the tennis team, or a straight-A student aiming for the most prestigious of educational institutions, in his heart could be found a vortex of lewd intrusive thoughts… Not like Souta had ever peeked into anyone else's heart, but he remained convinced this was true.

If La Pucelle were to think any dubious thoughts around Snow White, even for an instant…and if Snow White were to pick up on those thoughts… Souta had to avoid such a situation at all costs.

Back when he had been into anime, Souta hadn't seen it as much of a problem, but magical girls often revealed a lot of skin.

This was true for Snow White, La Pucelle's usual partner. Despite all the running and jumping she did, her skirt was very short. La Pucelle would find her eyes traveling to the peach-colored sections between her boots and skirt.

And the other magical girls also were highly lacking in self-awareness. Souta had heard that students at all-girls schools were less guarded and more daring because there were no boys watching them. Magical girls, too, were surely never thinking a boy was in their midst.

Take Top Speed, for example. Flying through the air inevitably meant people would see you from below. But her skirt was short. When she flew on her broom, her skirt's hem would flutter, and when she fired her boosters, the hem would flap up, and when she landed, the skirt would fly all over—whatever she did, it was always like you could just about get a peek, and it made La Pucelle excited and anxious. To make things worse, Top Speed was really friendly, so maybe that was why she was particularly touchy-feely. She would whack La Pucelle on the back, or pat her on the shoulder, and occasionally even smack her on the butt. Each time, she'd get very close, crossing the boundaries of personal space. And she'd even hug La Pucelle to express joy, and link arms with her in attempts to get closer, and when they were totally pressed together like that, La Pucelle's mind would go blank.

And Ripple, who often worked with Top Speed, was pretty bad as far as exposed skin was concerned. Her shoulders, midriff, and thighs were all bared. She always seemed so on edge, though, so of course there were no opportunities to ogle her. But just the other day, Top Speed had come over with Ripple. The topic had turned to magical-girl costumes, and Top Speed had been like, "That makes me wonder, does this thing feel stuff?" and she'd grabbed La Pucelle's tail. La Pucelle had freaked out and nearly toppled backward, and when she reflexively shot out an arm, right there had been Ripple's stomach… La Pucelle still hadn't forgotten what it had felt like, even now. It had been soft and smooth. Since that had been Top Speed's fault, Ripple had gotten mad at Top Speed rather than her, but La Pucelle had felt quite bad about the whole thing.

Ruler's group had comparatively fewer magical girls who

caused La Pucelle stress in that regard. The Twin Angels were more like mascot characters than human girls. They made La Pucelle think, *You guys are so busy for being so tiny!* This was also true for Tama. Her actions and reactions in the chat were often reminiscent of a dog's, and she was less a girl and closer to a smart, adorable pet. As for Ruler—La Pucelle absolutely could not say this in front of the girl herself, but compared to other magical girls, she was rather straight up and down, and her costume wasn't too revealing. Appearancewise, she exuded a slightly charming aura, and that was all you could really tell about her. Those four magical girls were safe, nothing heart-pounding about them. That said, since La Pucelle rarely interacted with them in real life, it didn't make much difference whether they were "safe," but Souta was still grateful he had nothing to feel guilty about there.

Not every member of Team Ruler was harmless to him, however. There was also Swim Swim. The first time Souta had seen her avatar in the chat, he hadn't thought anything of her school swimsuit costume. He often saw those in gym class in summer—hers being white was unusual, but it wasn't a particularly new sight. However, some time after, when La Pucelle had been guiding a lost granny to Monzenmachi, her luck ran out. Ruler had spotted her and snapped, "Don't barge into our territory without permission!" As Ruler had been scolding La Pucelle harshly like a finicky teacher, La Pucelle's eyes had been locked on Swim Swim, standing beside Ruler, the whole time. They were big. Very, super big. The hugeness Souta never would be able to see at school made La Pucelle's head spin for non-heat-related reasons, and she didn't hear any of Ruler's complaining at all.

Then there was Calamity Mary, who La Pucelle had heard was an enemy of Ruler's group. She'd just seen her once from afar, when Calamity Mary apparently had some business at the port, where she was flanked by several sketchy-looking men. Wondering if Mary was going to engage in some shady deal and if she should challenge her, La Pucelle had looked over to see her in an extremely provocative outfit: a skimpy leopard-print bikini top and a thin, short miniskirt that looked like it'd flip up at the slightest breeze. Most of all, her figure—she was either as voluptuous as Swim Swim or even more so. It looked like a close competition. And because of such thoughts, by the time La Pucelle had snapped out of it, Mary and the men were already gone.

In this category, the dark horse sort of character was Nemurin. La Pucelle had never met her in real life, but Nemurin had appeared in one of Souta's dreams. Despite her appearing in his dream, he'd found Nemurin in a deep and pleasant-looking sleep, and La Pucelle would have felt bad to wake her, and so she'd just watched her like that for a while.

However, that outfit… In the chat they all had bobbleheaded cartoonish avatars, so Souta had only ever thought of Nemurin's getup of pajama top and socks as cute. But seeing her with realistic proportions, he realized that this combo was pretty powerful. The bare legs that extended from the hem of her pajama top were alluring, and to make it worse, Nemurin would occasionally roll over, and every time, it just about seemed like it'd be a disaster, and La Pucelle wondered, *What do I do? Should I wake her up? Or should I…?* and in a panic, Souta had woken up.

La Pucelle wasn't in a position to complain about other girls' costumes in the first place. Armor was supposed to be for protection, so then why was the armor on her lower body basically like a swimsuit, or underwear? When La Pucelle had first met Sister Nana, her mentor, she'd assumed Sister Nana would ask her why only her lower half was so exposed, and she had felt quite despondent about it. But that had never happened. Sister Nana herself was also scantily clad for some odd reason.

Sister Nana's supposed nun outfit was sleeveless, her skirt had a long slit up it, her full chest was emphasized with a belt, and garters held up her white stockings. It was truly sacrilegious. One assumed that Sister Nana herself had picked out the costume. Just what had she been thinking…? La Pucelle could not and would not ask. However, every time La Pucelle met up with her and saw that figure-flattering costume, she got more flustered.

Weiss Winterprison, Sister Nana's partner, was the exception to the rule: Her costume wasn't revealing. In the wintertime she could mingle among normal people and make people think, *What a beautiful person* without seeming out of place.

But a costume that isn't revealing can give rise to alluring contrast. About a month ago, Sister Nana, Weiss Winterprison, and La Pucelle had been chatting on a high-rise roof. Suddenly the sky had clouded over, and the three of them had been soaked by a pounding rain. Winterprison had taken off her coat and used it to cover Sister Nana's head. Even through her thin sweater, La Pucelle

could see the figure that was normally hidden under a coat, her balanced build—and, noticing her chest region was particularly shapely, La Pucelle had jerked her eyes away.

This was what made magical girls such dangerous creatures. They gave La Pucelle very dirty thoughts.

Though there wasn't much point in loudly insisting that the essence of the problem was with magical girls themselves. What was important was the relationship between Snow White and La Pucelle.

Snow White's magic was fairly imprecise. It seemed she could only grasp the general idea of what went on in the hearts of others. However, if by chance she were to pick up on wicked thoughts, that would spell the end of La Pucelle's magical-girl activities. La Pucelle very much wanted to avoid that. And to that end, she had to empty her mind.

At this rate, even her own chest jiggling made her brain go, *Ohhh.* This was no good. When she stood up and patted off her bottom, she was surprised by how soft it felt to the touch, and she would thoughtlessly touch her palm to it, entranced by the nice feeling of sinking it in. She'd be completely zoned out until Snow White called out to her—that was absolutely no good.

☆ Snow White

Snow White was a little bit worried about La Pucelle, who was her senior magical girl and also her childhood friend. Lately, every time they met up, La Pucelle's thoughts were so intensely focused on one thing alone:

That she would be in trouble if Snow White were to read her thoughts.

Snow White tilted her head. She had no idea what La Pucelle was so afraid of someone else knowing.

One time, Snow White had showed up at the steel tower earlier than their meetup time. La Pucelle had already been atop the tower, but she'd been sitting there with a glum, serious expression, and Snow White had felt like she couldn't speak to her at all. A few times after that, Snow White had showed up early to watch La Pucelle from a hiding spot. Her friend would stand on her head, or

strike weird poses, or make her sword giant and swing it around wildly—her behavior escalated to greater and greater heights. There was something ghastly about the sight.

Did that strange behavior have something to do with what she didn't want known? Snow White wanted to help her out, somehow, but if she didn't know what the problem was, then she couldn't help. *I wish she'd tell me, but it's not like I can force it out of her…* Her mind was so fixated on this conundrum that at one point her teacher scolded her for being distracted in class.

When she went to bed with these worries on her mind, she had a dream. In the dream, Nemurin cutely yawned in her sleep, and Snow White shook her by the shoulders, saying, "You'll catch a cold if you sleep here!" and woke her up.

"Huh? Snow White… Hnnn, Nemurin needs more sleep."

"You don't have to sleep in your dreams, too."

"It's because it's a dream that Nemurin can get a good sleep, though… You kinda look like you're short on sleep, too, huh, Snow White? Is there something on your mind that's keeping you up?"

"Yeah… La Pucelle's been acting strange lately."

"It'd be super-cool if Nemurin could solve this problem for you, but interpersonal relationship troubles are beyond Nemurin's scope…so why not try asking someone else for help? Sometimes you can't resolve this sort of stuff on your own, right? Someone else is bound to come up with some good ideas."

Nemurin waved as she floated away. Koyuki woke up.

What came to her mind upon waking was Top Speed's smile. She was always so kind and would be helpful with things, so surely Snow White could count on her. Through the chat, she set a time for them to meet, then headed over to Top Speed's base.

"A problem she can't tell other people, huh…?" said Top Speed.

"Yes," Snow White replied with a nod. "And she seems off even when I'm not there with her… It's sort of like…she's suffering from feelings of guilt."

"Hmm. Maybe it's not a magical-girl thing, but actually about her private life?"

"Could be… We're generally together when she's a magical girl, after all."

"Then it's about her family, or her friends. You've known her from before you guys became magical girls, right? Nothin' comes to mind?"

Snow White thought back on how Souta used to be. They spent all their time together in preschool. By elementary school, Souta had started playing with his guy friends, and the two of them had gradually drifted apart. What she knew about Souta since middle school only came from hearsay.

"I can't quite think of anything," said Snow White. "We haven't really spent time together outside of when we're magical girls, recently… I think she gets along fine with her family, but I don't really know about her friends."

"So then I bet that's it. Like she's got a bad friend or something."

That did make sense—Souta's having a bad friend did seem very plausible. Koyuki remembered a kid in her class who put on a bad-boy act and such with his buddies. Though he went to a different school, Souta Kishibe was also a middle school boy. Even if he wasn't into it himself, some friends might draw him into some delinquent behavior.

Top Speed noticed Snow White's face turn pale and then continued. "It's common enough to go along with some nasty stuff to keep from humiliatin' your friends. Though once you're an independent adult and ya experience some hardships, then you'll change some, but around middle school age, kids don't have much flexibility in the way they think and the way they do things."

Koyuki's imagination ran even wilder as she listened to Top Speed. If Souta was hanging out with kids like that, then there was also the possibility that eventually, he would come to think of magical girls as childish and stupid. La Pucelle might stop working as a magical girl. Koyuki Himekawa would be left all alone again.

After growing distant from Souta and winding up watching magical-girl anime alone, Koyuki had felt such endless loneliness. She didn't want to feel like that ever again. Just remembering it put her on the verge of tears.

"Is Sou…gonna quit being a magical girl?" Now that she'd said that out loud, she honestly felt like she would cry. Snow White willed herself not to.

"Quittin' bein' a magical girl…that's a big deal." Top Speed's tone was unusually serious. "If I have to, I'll lend a hand, so don't ya worry. Anyways, La Pucelle's mentor's Sister Nana, right? I figure it'd be good to try askin' her opinion, too."

Koyuki thanked Top Speed, then hurried over to Sister Nana. "I

think La Pucelle might be hanging out with a bad crowd that's sending her down the wrong path. She might quit being a magical girl…"

Putting a hand to her mouth and looking quite stricken, Sister Nana looked over at Winterprison, who was beside her. "What do you think?" she asked.

"Huh? Me?" Winterprison narrowed her eyes slightly and gave a small sigh, then began, "When you're thinking bad thoughts, it's best to get your body moving. When you're sweaty and exhausted, you stop wanting to think about anything, good or bad." Folding her arms, she nodded. "If she likes, I wouldn't mind showing her the ropes. I was in sports clubs for a few years."

Winterprison looked over to Sister Nana as if asking, *How's that idea?*

Sister Nana offered a little smile, then removed her hand from her mouth and firmed up her expression, turning back to Snow White. Snow White found herself straightening her posture to face Sister Nana again.

"Everyone hears the whispers of the devil from time to time," said Sister Nana.

"The whispers of the devil…?" Snow White tilted her head.

"Saying, *'Cheating will make it easier; being violent will feel good…'* Lending your ear to such whispers will plunge you to the deepest depths. I have the devil whispering in my ear quite often, you know…telling me to dive into a sea of desire."

"Huh? Really?"

"When I have to be on a diet, the devil whispers, *'These snacks are delicious.'"*

Snow White burst out laughing, and Sister Nana smiled gently. Now that the tension had eased up, Sister Nana continued. "The devil is yourself, and the whisper is the voice of your own heart. When evil would sprout in your heart, you should think of the faces of those dear to you."

"The faces…of those dear to me?"

"If you indulge in vice, it's not only about you. It can also involve those you care about, directly or indirectly. When you commit a crime, you're not the only one who will be subject to criticism. Those wounds borne by your family or lover may well be greater than your own. For me, I think of Winterprison."

"You don't do bad things, Nana," said Winterprison.

“I’m speaking purely hypothetically. Whom do you think of, Winterprison?”

“You already know what I’m gonna say.” …And the two of them started flirting on like that. Regardless, Winterprison had a point. It was a common enough scene in fiction that someone barricaded themselves in for some crime, and then their parents were summoned to call out to them on a megaphone.

This time, it wouldn’t be a detective taking on the role of winning someone over, but Snow White. It was a big job. She had to give this her all.

Oh, and one more thing.

If she was going to be serious about convincing La Pucelle, then it would be better to do it in human form. Souta wouldn’t be as wary that way. She had to do her absolute best so that she could continue as a magical girl together with La Pucelle forever.

☆ La Pucelle

Completely beat from his after-school club, Souta headed home. When he opened the door of his house and greeted his mother, she met him with a wide grin. He furrowed his eyebrows in suspicion.

“Your friend is here,” she told him.

Who could it be this late in the day? Not having a clue who it was, Souta went up the stairs and slid open the door to his room to find a girl sitting there. He knew her—her petite figure kneeling daintily in front of the bed on top of a sitting cushion for guests was familiar. Souta even started saying “Snow—” and then corrected himself. “Koyuki. Why are you here?”

“Lately, um, Sou…you’re always thinking the same thing, aren’t you? It’s about that.”

Souta blanched. With such a serious expression on her face, he could tell what Koyuki was trying to say.

She knows…!

It was over. It was all over. Closing the door behind him, Souta tossed his bag on the bed, then collapsed into a seat in front of Koyuki. Prepared for a look of contempt from her, he hung his head.

“Hey, Sou. Do you want to keep being a magical girl?” There was no contempt in her tone. When Souta lifted his head, he saw

there was actually compassion in her eyes. “I can get a sense of what’s going on, Sou. That sort of thing is pretty common with middle school boys, right? That’s what Top Speed said.”

So Top Speed knows, too, huh…

How far had it gotten spread around? A dark shadow fell over Souta’s heart.

“Hey, Sou. You’re not going to quit being a magical girl, right?” It was more than her expression; he could sense clear desperation in her tone, too. Now Souta figured out just what she was asking of him. She was giving him two options: to abandon his dirty thoughts, or to quit being a magical girl.

Of course, Souta didn’t have these dirty thoughts because he wanted them. This was the instinct of a middle school boy, and a biological phenomenon. But could he get Koyuki to understand that? He didn’t even feel like he could explain it in the first place.

Souta held his head in his hands and squeezed it out. “I want to keep being a magical girl. But there’s nothing I can do about it.”

“Top Speed said that if needed, she’d lend a hand,” said Koyuki.

Instantly Souta envisioned Top Speed lending him a hand. In contrast with her rough and masculine manner of speech, she was of the more petite sort, among magical girls. Her reaching out one of those small, delicate hands to—

“—She also said that when it gets hard, things will soften you up.”

“Wh-what?!”

“Like when you experience hardships, it makes your thinking more flexible.”

“O-oh, that’s what you mean.”

“And Winterprison also said that when you’re worried about something, it’s a good idea to move your body.”

“Even Winterprison…?”

“She said she’d show you the ropes.”

Show me…what?!

La Pucelle sure had been shown *something* that time Winterprison had slung her coat over Sister Nana. Even through her sweater, those two somethings had firmly asserted their presence, and if she was offering to show him… No, no, no, that wasn’t right. “Showing someone the ropes” was a normal turn of phrase. There was room to assume he was misunderstanding things somehow here.

Koyuki was looking at Souta with concern. Maybe she was testing him. Was this a test to see if this would bring dirty thoughts to his mind? Because if so, he definitely wasn't passing. He couldn't use logic to restrain what his mind did.

Souta breathed a painful sigh. "Sorry, Koyuki…but there's nothing I can do about it."

"You can't give up! Sister Nana also said, you know, that sometimes, the devil will whisper to you."

The image of a devil whispering lewdly into Sister Nana's ear rose in his mind. Sister Nana would struggle, saying, *"We mustn't, stop, please"*—but she wouldn't be able to fight off the devil's persistent whispering, and her cheeks would redden, sweat beading all over her. In the end, the long arms of the devil would reach out to her body—*No! What am I thinking?!* Souta shook his head violently.

"Sou?"

"Uhh, I'm okay… It's nothing."

"Sister Nana told me about what to do when you feel like evil will blossom in your heart." With an *ahem*, Koyuki cleared her throat and laid her hands over her knees. "When you think bad thoughts, you should just think of your mother's face."

Urk…!

His mother's face rose in his mind, and the storm that had been raging inside his heart instantly calmed. His ragged breathing and rapid-fire pulse all returned to normal.

"How was it? Did it work?" she asked.

Indeed, it had. He'd cooled down all at once, as if he'd swallowed a big chunk of ice. But…

Th-this is painful in another way…!

With a shaky smile on his face, Souta nodded at Koyuki, telling her, "I'm okay now."

Tears of joy sprang to Koyuki's eyes. "Now we can continue to be magical girls together, huh?" she said.

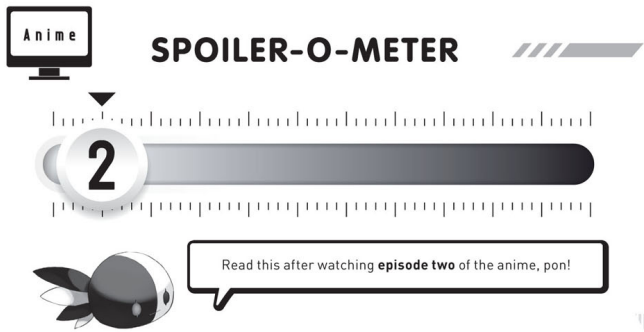
Souta was happy, too, but he was actually harshly judging himself.

From that day forward, La Pucelle stopped thinking, *I don't want Snow White reading my thoughts.* She became bolder and more confident than before, and she said that she'd managed to adopt an attitude more befitting a noble knight. But occasionally she would stare blankly into the distance, and she never told even Snow White the reason why.

This is a new story written for this book.

Top Speed's Top Speed

This story is set shortly after Ripple becomes a magical girl.



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"Anyway, just eat it. It's good," said Top Speed.

Ripple bit into the deep-fried meat patty. The bottom was soaked in the juices of the stewed veggies. Top Speed's cooking always left something to be desired in the way of presentation, but it tasted great.

"Delicious, ain't it?"

"…I guess."

Hand on the back of her head, Top Speed looked embarrassed as she said, "Uh, well, that ain't what I came to talk about here. Actually, I wanted to ask ya a favor."

Ripple chewed her bite of meat patty, swallowed, and, once her mouth was empty, clicked her tongue.

"C'mon, man, whatcha clickin' your tongue for?"

"…I'm annoyed."

"Huh? About what?"

"This favor of yours won't be anything good…"

"Hey now, it's not gonna be a huge deal."

"Like *'Lend me money'* or something…"

"Well, it does involve money."

"Knew it."

"I'm not sayin' you gotta lend me some!"

Ripple bit into the remainder of the patty. The part that hadn't gotten soaked in the veggie juices was crisp, and quite satisfying to bite into. "So more like…*'Give me money'?*" she asked Top Speed.

"That's way too direct. And no."

Ripple had never had anyone look to her for help, and that included when she was Kano Sazanami, her pretransformation self. Ripple knew she wasn't the type to give advice, and she also felt like doling out advice was just a hassle, so she didn't want to take requests in the first place. But right now, she was inclined to think she might as well hear this out. If Ripple agreed to help, she could

get Top Speed in her debt. She didn't have even the slightest urge to help Top Speed, but maybe she could get her to wipe that arrogant *"I'm your elder"* look off her face, and that was a major motivator.

"…So?" said Ripple.

"Huh? So what?"

"What do you want me to do…?"

"Ohh, you'll hear me out? Thanks." Top Speed folded her arms and with a worried expression on her face arched her back, pushing the tip of her witch hat into the fence behind her and smushing it over. "It's about Magicaloid. You've seen her before in the chat, right, Ripple?"

Magicaloid 44. The robot-type magical girl. Or maybe she was a magical girl–type robot. The only thought Ripple had ever had about her was *She's weird*, and she had assumed she'd never have anything to do with her, so Ripple didn't know much about her.

However, if she admitted that, then Top Speed would respond with something like, *"What? No point askin' ya, then. Fine, I'll try someone else,"* which would make Ripple mad, so she decided to pretend to know Magicaloid 44. "So…what did she say…?" Ripple asked, trying to get more information out of Top Speed.

"She said she wanted me to buy an item from her that only I can use."

"Huh…"

"And that I could only use it for one day, so to buy it fast."

"Hmm… Then what do you want from me?"

"It's not like I ain't at all interested in Magicaloid's item, but the problem is that it's pricey. I ain't rich."

"Obviously…"

"Rude. Anyway, I ain't rich, but I *am* a pushover—I mean, I'm weak to a hard sell. Whenever someone's like, *'Look how amazin' this is!'* I'll be like, *'For real?!'* and just go and buy it without thinkin', and that gets people mad at me. It's happened a bunch of times."

Ripple chose not to reply, *"That's because you're dumb."* She was silent not out of consideration for Top Speed, but because saying that wouldn't fix her problem.

"I'm worried 'bout that this time, too," Top Speed went on. "So that's where you come in, Ripple."

"…What?"

"If it looks like I'm about to buy somethin' expensive, you jump

in somehow. You're good at comin' up with witty jabs and stuff, right?"

"Not really…"

"C'mon, just a while ago you—"

A voice interjected, "What are you talking about?"

Both girls turned around at the same time, then looked up at a forty-degree angle. A human-shaped robot was floating in the air, fire shooting from her backpack-shaped booster rockets. It was Magicaloid 44. She gradually descended, and the angle of Ripple's and Top Speed's gazes lowered along with her, and by the time she eventually landed, they were staring down. Magicaloid was shorter—or perhaps it would be more apt to call her a more compact model—than Top Speed, who was shorter than Ripple. Magicaloid was small enough that you'd take her for a preschooler, or an elementary schooler.

"Aw, hey," said Top Speed. "We were just chattin'."

"All right, as long as there is no problem." The flames that spewed from her back boosters went out, and Magicaloid lifted her chin. She made eye contact with Ripple; that intense inorganic presence, that feeling like she wasn't real, was overwhelming, but Ripple hated looking away, so she stared right back.

"We met in the chat, did we not? I am Magicaloid 44."

"…Hi."

Ripple was aware that her ninja motif was nonstandard, as magical-girl style went, and she regretted not having been more careful when making her avatar. But lately she'd come to think that ninjas were all right, and her initial dissatisfaction with the ninja motif had faded. But seeing Magicaloid now reminded her of how fixated she'd been on being properly magical girl–ish. Not a single thing about Magicaloid was magical girl–like—in fact, she didn't even seem human.

When Ripple had seen her avatar in the chat, she'd figured she just seemed like that because it was a cartoon version, and she was actually probably doing robot cosplay. Actually seeing her in person made her realize Magicaloid was nothing other than a robot. She looked plasticky in texture, and her eyes faintly glowed red.

Magicaloid approached Ripple and knelt down to examine her feet intently. "I am impressed you can walk with those."

It took Ripple a moment to realize Magicaloid was talking about the geta. Top Speed cut in: "If we're talkin' about bein' more

agile than ya look, you're the more impressive one, Magicaloid."

"True enough. That goes for the both of us."

The two of them laughed. Magicaloid's expression seemed to change, too, but Ripple couldn't quite read the emotions there. Then Magicaloid suddenly stopped laughing, reaching into her side bag as she said, "Da-dadadaaa" like some sort of video game noise. Sitting on her hand was a sort of device Ripple had never seen before. It was cuboid, like a block of tofu in size and shape, with things like cables, cords, and narrow pipes sticking out of it.

"This is a performance-enhancement device for use with magic broomsticks," said Magicaloid.

"That's a pretty niche item, huh?" Top Speed said.

"It is because it is so niche that I have brought it to you."

"Gotcha. Makes sense." Top Speed folded her arms and nodded. "But that ain't the problem."

"Oh? Was there a problem?"

"I heard from Sister Nana. Your items are ten thousand yen each, and ya can only have 'em for a day, right? So right now, it's eleven o'clock, and in one more hour, it'll be over. And wait, I got a curfew, so it's not even an hour, more like forty minutes, at most. Flushin' away a ten-thousand-yen note just for the sake of forty minutes, no way."

Magicaloid put her hand to her lips and lowered her voice. "But what if you think about it from another angle?"

"Whaddaya mean, another angle?"

"Despite being a single-use item for only forty minutes, it is ten thousand yen. In other words…" Magicaloid dropped her voice even further. "That is just how powerful it is. I believe you understand, Top Speed, that with motorcycles and cars, reducing your time by even a fraction of a second is incredibly expensive."

"I see." For some reason, even Top Speed was lowering her voice.

"A street racer cannot be frugal on this sort of expenditure for powering up her machine, even if it is only for forty minutes—especially for you, Top Speed, the fastest in N City."

"You got a point…"

"Ahh, and this very moment, valuable time is flying by… Our forty minutes left has become thirty-five minutes."

"Mmngh."

Seeing Top Speed starting to lean forward, Ripple clicked her

tongue hard and glared at Magicaloid. Magicaloid's mouth twitched like she was flinching, and then she cleared her throat. That gesture was so human, it was really strange, given her appearance.

Top Speed looked over at Ripple, giving her a thumbs-up at an angle Magicaloid couldn't see. "Yeah, that's expensive. Real expensive. I ain't buyin'."

"Indeed," Magicaloid replied, nodding. "Your view is very reasonable. So today I have a special offer: half price, at five thousand yen."

"Seriously?! Half price, that's a steal…"

Ripple clicked her tongue.

"Hmm? Uh, no, no! That's still way expensive."

"Then I can halve it again, at twenty-five hundred yen…"

"Ooh…!"

There came another click of Ripple's tongue.

"Ahh, that's still kinda…"

"…And in celebration of a full recovery from the college freshman blues, it is now one-fifth of that, priced at five hundred yen."

With three clicks of her tongue, Ripple had brought the price down to one-twentieth.

Magicaloid probably thought that since this item could only exist for the day, it was better to throw it away dirt cheap than for it to be no use at all. This was the kind of deal where you could haggle all you wanted.

However, Top Speed clapped her hands in abject glee. "For real? Ninety-five percent off, that's like a goin'-out-of-business sale."

It seemed possible to get Magicaloid to slash the price even further, but this was still good enough. Ripple had made her lower the price to five hundred yen, so she could say she had fulfilled her duty here.

Ripple adjusted the sound inside her mouth, clicking her tongue at a higher pitch. Hearing that higher tongue click, Top Speed nodded and followed up with, "For five hundred yen, I'll buy."

"Were you two talking with tongue clicks?"

"You're imaginin' things. Anyway, this device won't have some kinda malfunction, will it?"

"There is not even one single instance of anyone being dissatisfied with a Magicaloid-seal item."

"Well, maybe that's been true so far, but…"

“I am certain that will continue to always be the case.”

“All right, I trust ya, then. If ya lie, a thousand needles in your eye. Right, then, let’s get right to it.”

“Ohh, a fine decision. Well, then, I will install it immediately. Bring your Rapid Swallow over here.”

Magicaloid slid down underneath the Rapid Swallow. She split the tip of the floating broom in two, and there were some rattling sounds, and less than thirty seconds later, she got up again with a “Hup” and pushed the broom back in front of Top Speed. “It is complete.”

“Ya really are fast.”

“This is my business, after all.”

Did that mean this was how she was earning money to support herself? More than once, Ripple had figured it’d be nice if she could use her magical-girl abilities to make money, so she wanted to ask Magicaloid about that. But that the robot was putting her hand to her mouth to hide her smile made her seem sketchy, so Ripple merely stared at her in silence.

“Whoa!” Top Speed exclaimed. “It really does enhance performance!”

“Well, of course. It is a Magicaloid-seal item.”

“This is a lotta power. Pretty badass.”

Top Speed revved the engine, then spun once, twice in the air, then did a 360 flip forward. “The response is totally different!” she cheered, but Ripple’s eyes couldn’t tell what was different about Rapid Swallow compared to before.

“All right,” Top Speed said, “let’s take it for a spin right now. It’s boring just toolin’ around here.”

“Well, then, before your departure.” Magicaloid held out her right hand. “That will be five hundred yen.”

“Man, what a great purchase.” Top Speed took a five-hundred-yen coin from her coin purse and handed it over to Magicaloid, who dropped it into the cloth bag that hung off the side of her backpack.

“Thank you for your patronage. This, too, is a part of greater economic activity. Active circulation of cash is one form of contribution to society. So it is legitimate behavior for a magical girl, who is fundamentally about service, to so—”

“C’mon, Ripple, take a seat.”

Ripple was suspicious about the device, but if she refused, she’d probably waste time pointlessly arguing about whether she was

going to get on the broom. Ripple had already resigned herself to putting up with this until the end of the day anyway, so she just clicked her tongue first before throwing one leg over the rear seat.

"And so will I," said Magicaloid.

"Huh?"

"So that if there are any malfunctions on your flight, I can repair it. The five hundred yen is for insurance and a technician's fee."

"Uh-huh…so what're ya after really?"

"I wanted to try riding this broom, just once."

"Can't ya fly on your own, Magicaloid?"

"Flying on your own and flying using a device are completely different. And most importantly, a magic broomstick is such a classic adventure item that any girl would want to try riding once in her life. I was a fan of *Magical Smuggler Blood Raven*, you know."

Did a robot count as a girl?

"Guess I've got no choice," Top Speed muttered, but this wasn't as much trouble as she made it sound like. If anything, she seemed happy—probably because someone had complimented her broomstick. She hoisted Magicaloid up by the collar and sat her down in front of Ripple. Or rather, she squeezed her in.

Ripple clicked her tongue.

"What, Ripple?" said Top Speed.

"It's cramped…"

"Just deal with it for a bit."

"No need to be so hostile," said Magicaloid. "Please, consider me a good-luck charm."

"Shameless…"

"I am told that a lot."

"You guys ready? Hold on tight."

"Ready and willing."

"Hmph."

"All right, then we're goin' with the usual route!"

As if pulled by some invisible thread, the Rapid Swallow zipped upward without any resistance.

"Woo! This is dope!" The tone of Top Speed's voice, the way her broom moved, and her legs extended straight ahead all indicated she was in a great mood.

By contrast, Ripple's mood was plummeting. *Hope this pointless flight ends soon*, she thought as she clicked her tongue.

Regardless of whether Top Speed could hear Ripple's tongue clicking, she somersaulted the broom in the air, then spun them like a drill, enjoying more acrobatics than usual. With a sigh, Ripple looked down upon the world below.

The ocean was dotted with the lights of fishing boats. The brightest part of the town was Calamity Mary's Jounan district. Night never fell on that region. There were some lights twinkling in Nakajuku, too. The mountains were dim, lit only by the cars and streetlamps.

Noticing the lights of the world below shrinking, Ripple clicked her tongue. Even now, they were still rising. This meant Top Speed didn't plan to land. Just how long would Ripple be forced to go along with her nonsense?

Ripple clicked her tongue. Top Speed didn't notice.

Ripple clicked her tongue harder. Top Speed still didn't notice.

"Let's head back…," Ripple said.

Top Speed did not turn around, ignoring her. Of course, this irked Ripple, and she reached out to lay her hand on Top Speed's shoulder, but right before it touched, Top Speed yelled, "Awesome!"

Rapid Swallow zigzagged through the sky—right, then left. "Awesome! The speed! The power! The maneuverability! This reminds me of when I was in the gang!"

She sped up. Tearing through the clouds, the broom flew. The pressure increased, and for just an instant they even broke the sound barrier. Ripple clicked her tongue, and she grabbed Top Speed's shoulder but was immediately shaken off.

"I can do it! I can go even harder! Forever! And ever!"

"Stop it… Top Speed…"

Rapid Swallow was shuddering and quaking, though Top Speed paid that no mind. Ripple was bewildered; she tried to put her hand on Top Speed's shoulder but was knocked away with a smack. Top Speed was completely drunk on this experience.

Ripple heard a moaning voice from Magicaloid's chest: "This is shaking pretty badly; is it always like this?"

"No…," Ripple replied.

This was clearly faster than usual. And rougher. Rapid Swallow took a sudden dive, and Ripple clung to the broom handle, panicking. Below them was the river. Skimming over the river's surface, they sliced into the water, sending up a tall spray in their wake.

Top Speed howled. With a twist, Rapid Swallow passed under a bridge, and Ripple felt a sensation like her innards were shifting inside her body, making her feel so sick she trembled. “I’m the freest of all!” Top Speed yelled, like a sad slave warrior fighting in a coliseum.

“Awwwriiight!” Top Speed yelled next, and she sped up her broom even harder. Not a single thing about this was all right. The broom was shaking in every direction. Ripple clenched her teeth, clinging to the broom handle with both hands—it was the most she could do to just not get thrown off.

“Huh, you are sure this is not how it always is? Really?” asked Magicaloid.

“Usually it’s more like…”

The broom snaked along the river until a culvert came into view. Ripple reflexively cringed, thinking, *We’re going to crash!*

But the broom slipped right into the culvert. Ripple suppressed her scream and hunched over, but Magicaloid didn’t hold back from wailing, “AHHHHH! This is dangerous!”

“It’s been dangerous for a while now…”

As they emerged from the culvert, not a moment after they came out under the light of the moon, right there was a cement-reinforced river wall. Rapid Swallow jumped up, shaving off a part of the embankment as it flew over.

Top Speed was not the sort of magical girl who would normally act so reckless. And normally, if Ripple ordered her to stop, then she would stop, more or less. After stopping, she would argue back, like, *“Why do I gotta stop?”* or *“I don’t feel like there’s any real reason for me to stop,”* or *“Ya don’t trust my skills?”* or whatever, but she’d never blatantly ignored what Ripple said and gone wild. Right now, Top Speed was clearly going off the rails.

“Hey, watch ou— Seriously, care—!”

“Ah, ngh, ah, keh—” Just trying to say anything almost made Ripple bite her tongue, but the sounds slipped out of her on their own. And then, because the broom was shaking too hard, she couldn’t make proper words.

“This—hey—wai—” Magicaloid tried to speak.

“M-M-Magica—loid—”

“Wh-whyyyyyyyyy?!”

A sudden acceleration made Ripple’s head feel like it would get snapped off. Ripple leaned so far forward that her chin touched the

back of Magicaloid's head, and somehow managed to hang on. The broom sped up and jetted through the air. It was fast enough that it stabilized so they could talk. Ripple said to Magicaloid, "L-let's get out of here…"

"Pardon?"

"Let's leave this idiot behind and fly away… I'll grab on to you."

"That is not happening."

Rapid Swallow passed through a dip in the ground, sending a whole bunch of dirt and sand blasting up.

"Besides," Magicaloid continued, "the broom is creating some shock waves here and there. And we have been breaking the sound barrier, occasionally. Over and over I have thought about getting off this thing, except it is too dangerous."

"Well…"

"This is why I am telling you I cannot leave, even though I want to. Anyway, I am sitting in the middle here, am I not? If we fall somewhere, perhaps the two of you will be a cushion for me and will lessen the damage, ha-ha-ha!" Her laughter faded out at the end, finally becoming a sigh.

"Here goes!" Top Speed yelled.

Voice trembling, Magicaloid responded, "Here goes what?"

Top Speed said, "I'm aimin' for a record!"

She didn't wait for Magicaloid's response. As they raced onward, Rapid Swallow rotated to slip between two trees. The trees were blasted to pieces and tossed skyward far behind them. Magicaloid lost her balance, lurching toward the right side, and then, when the inertia hit her, she lurched left. Her right hand left the broom handle, and she tried to take hold again only to miss the handle completely. Her left hand slipped, too, and her body floated in the air—

"Ngwaaaaaugh!" Abandoning her robot-speak, Magicaloid howled.

Lighting the flames of her booster rockets the instant of her fall, she changed direction, reaching out, and Ripple took firm hold of her hand. It felt plasticky, but the force of her grasp was that of a human. Ripple yanked her arm, and Magicaloid grabbed at the white puffball that hung from Ripple's waist to pull herself up. Magicaloid latched on to Ripple's waist, and it hurt like her innards were getting squeezed, but this wasn't a situation where she could

say to loosen her grip.

"AhmanahmanthatwascloseforrealwhatthehellIthoughtIwasgonnadie."

"You're talking weird…," said Ripple.

"Ah, pardon me. I lost control for a moment."

"Go, go, gooo!" Top Speed howled.

"The driver is letting go as well, huh?"

"Yeah…"

"Blaaaast offfff!"

"Blast what, exactly…?"

"Ripple, you're her partner! Stop her somehooooow!"

"Watch out…!"

"Waaaaa-hoo!" Top Speed yelled out in a singsong voice, and the Rapid Swallow started pulling even more new moves. She stroked the surface of the mountains as she flew, on a trajectory so close to the trees and rocks that Ripple expected to crash at any moment, skimming the mountains. Even though they never made direct contact, just getting close to the ground shattered boulders and blasted up earth. Magicaloid clung to Ripple, and Ripple clenched Magicaloid's arms, which were wrapped around her waist. Clasping those robot arms, she thought, *Ahh.* Out of nowhere, she suddenly understood. Top Speed had been hitting it so hard, Ripple had been late to notice, but this was a course Top Speed often took when she was cruising around on her broom. She'd taken a shortcut through that culvert, and she was using the mountains and doing some acrobatics and stuff, but she was not off the right course.

However, this behavior was definitely off. Rapid Swallow scattered dirt and sent it flying, and when mud got into Ripple's mouth, she coughed, and her coughing made her body shake, which made Magicaloid yell, and as if acting in concord with Magicaloid's yell, Top Speed howled, and Rapid Swallow sped up.

"Ripple, please, something, do something, please," Magicaloid moaned.

"S-s-some-some-something?"

"J-just, d-do something, anything, anything at all! Yeep!"

What on earth could Ripple possibly manage when she was just clinging there? She tried to come up with some sort of plan, but she didn't have the mental capacity even for that. She knew she had to do something, but all she could do was scream, "Top Speed! Stop! Stop, Top Speed!"

"Top Speed! Stop!" Magicaloid joined in.

“Fly eeeverywhere!!” Top Speed cried.

Top Speed flew in circles along the highway over the mountain like wrapping a coil around a stick, and Ripple couldn’t manage to say anything, while Magicaloid buried her face in Ripple’s back and shook wildly. When they bent at practically a right angle to come away from the highway, Ripple was finally able to take a breath.

The way they were flying, it wouldn’t be strange at all if they caused an accident at some point along the line.

“Listen! Stop! Seriously, stop!” Ripple yelled.

“Stop or die!” Magicaloid shrieked.

“Bad! Bad!”

“Die! Diiiiie!”

“WAAAAAHOOOOO!”

Rapid Swallow did a half flip, and once their reversed center of gravity had left Magicaloid hanging in midair, all her body weight was on Ripple’s torso. The forest below them was like an ocean, and the pointed tips of the trees looked like lines of spears.

“O-ow!”

“Agbbbbbbbf—”

“Gooo! Keep going! Forwaaard! Rapid Swallooooooooow!”

Rapid Swallow shook hard, doing another 180 flip to return gravity to where it had been before. Magicaloid wailed. Ripple screamed. But still, screaming wouldn’t resolve the situation. Rapid Swallow’s trajectory wavered, and a branch of one spear point was blasted away, disappearing behind them. Top Speed’s head rocked as if it had been flung back.

“Yeaaaaaaaaaaahh!”

“Whoaaaaaaaaaaa!”

“Gyaaaaaaaaaaagh!”

The angle of Rapid Swallow’s nose gradually dropped; Ripple screamed, Magicaloid cried, and Top Speed laughed. When the ocean came into view, the nose lifted, and right before they hit the water, Top Speed yanked the broom upward. A spray of water splashed over them, some of which got in Ripple’s mouth and nose, the harsh salt choking her. As she choked, she was getting strangled around the torso. She flailed, unable to breathe, and Magicaloid continued to flip out. The Rapid Swallow bounded high in the sky as Ripple desperately clung to the handle, and Magicaloid clung to Ripple. And then—Ripple raised her head.

Suddenly Rapid Swallow’s speed dropped.

For the broom's riders, this stalling was akin to slamming on the brakes. Top Speed was tossed off the broom first, flying high in the air, and then Ripple's hands came off the broom handle, her body following inertia to be flung away. Magicaloid, who had never let go of Ripple's waist, tried to fire her boosters, but before she could, they fell into the ocean.

Ripple's face burst out of the sea, and she spat out the water in her mouth. The last thing she remembered was the massive pillar of water Top Speed had caused. She floated on her back for a while, dazed, before eventually realizing that she had survived, and she clicked her tongue in relief. Looking over toward the sound of splashing, she saw Magicaloid clinging to Rapid Swallow. Top Speed was floating not too far off as well.

Eventually the three of them washed up on the shore and staggered to their feet.

Suddenly Top Speed pulled out her magical phone and checked the screen. She clenched her teeth and moaned, expression pained as she covered her face with one hand and turned it up to the sky.

"Damn it! I thought for sure I set a course record! But it didn't get counted! And wait, I'm past curfew! Aw, man, I'm so gonna get it when I get home!"

Ripple pulled out her magical phone and checked the time display. It read 12:10 AM.

Magicaloid just barely managed to mutter, "The time limit for my items is midnight…," and Ripple's body went limp.

When it seemed like she would fall over, without missing a beat, Magicaloid lent her a shoulder. The ninja and robot looked at each other a moment, and then, without a word, embraced. Magicaloid's shoulders shook, and Ripple gently stroked her magicalium-alloy back.

"Hey…what was my time for that course? I don't really remember, but I think I shattered some records." Top Speed was staring at Magicaloid and Ripple with an expression of mixed exhaustion and confusion. Her hat was limp and soggy with ocean water, its point crushed.

Ripple gave a little click of her tongue.

This is a new story written for this book.

Magical Girl Tropes

This story is set right after Snow White and La Pucelle team up.

Anime

SPOILER-O-METER

Read this after watching **episode two** of the anime, pon!

Magical Girl Tropes

It happened in the magical-girl chat.

"I've always been drawn to magical girls," said Snow White. "So I'm glad I could become a real one myself."

"You really are quite gung ho about magical-girl work, aren't you, Snow White?" said Sister Nana.

"I've watched nothing but magical-girl anime ever since I was little—I grew up on it. I rented DVDs of old anime and practiced the famous lines and everything."

"Old magical-girl anime? Like *Miko-Chan*?"

"No, the first generation of *Cutie Healer*."

"Ahh, right, the younger generations consider that old…"

"I memorized all the special poses and lines from all her scenes!"

"Yeah, so did I," La Pucelle added. "And all of Cutie Healer's special moves."

"You too, La Pucelle?" said Snow White.

"Like Cutie Arrow, and Cutie Spear Charge… That takes me back. I was practically glued to the TV watching it."

"I was more into memorizing lines than moves."

"Cutie Healer does have such cool lines, too, after all," agreed Sister Nana.

"Yeah, yeah, that's right!" Snow White gushed. "When the villains are causing a scene, she'll appear with a *bam* and strike a pose like this. And then the line goes…'The white healer who presides over purity, Cutie Pearl! The black healer who presides over passion, Cutie Onyx! O tragic dolls with broken hearts, we shall heal your souls!'"

"Ohh, wow, Snow White," said La Pucelle. "You nailed it!"

"Indeed, that's precisely how it went," said Sister Nana. "I'm impressed you remember."

“Eh-heh-heh, I practiced it lots. I can also do *Cutie Healer Stripe*! ‘The black-and-white hybrid who races across the savanna, Cutie Zebra! The black-and-white mix who rules over bamboo forests, Cutie Panda! The black-and-white adventurer who crosses the great seas, Cutie Orca! The black-and-white shuffler who slides across floes of ice, Cutie Penguin! White and black, both are righteous, both are beautiful! We won’t let you choose just one!’”

“Whoa!” marveled La Pucelle. “That’s the later version that has all the extra warriors, too, isn’t it?”

“I’m impressed you remember each and every individual pose,” said Sister Nana.

“And I know the ones for your favorite, too, La Pucelle—*Cutie Healer Galaxy*.”

“Uh, I’m not sure I’d call it my favorite…”

“Come on, let’s do it together!”

“Huh…? Guess I have no choice. Okay…ahem. ‘How foolish, Cutie Healers. Your struggle will only bring joy to the Space Chaos…’”

“Wait, no, La Pucelle! That’s Dark Cutie!”

“Huh? Uh, yeah, it is.”

“If we’re doing it together, that obviously means Cutie Vega and Cutie Altair.”

“That’s not really obvious… And I like Dark Cutie better.”

“It’s weird to like a villain when you’re a knight of justice.”

“It’s fiction, so can’t I like a villain if I want?”

“I can sympathize,” Sister Nana cut in.

“Huh? You can, Sister Nana?” asked Snow White.

“Do you know the old anime *The Bandit and the Princess*?”

“Oh yeah,” said Snow White. “I saw it once a long time ago, on a kids’ anime special during the summer. The bandit kidnaps the princess, and then they grow closer while they’re living together—that’s how it went, right?”

“I remember that, too!” said La Pucelle. “The princess is so cute!”

“Living an earnest life without committing any sins, I sometimes think…I’d like to be forcibly kidnapped by someone.”

“H-hold up there, Sister Nana,” said La Pucelle. “This is drifting off topic.”

“Do pardon me. Well, then, what you said, Snow White, has made me curious about something.”

“Oh, what is it?”

“Your *Cutie Healer* lines and poses were all wonderful. But if you’re such a magical-girl fan…then wouldn’t you have made up your own original lines and poses for personal use?”

“Huh? Oh, right… Actually…”

“You did, huh?” said La Pucelle. “Might as well show us, then. I wanna see.”

“Stop it, La Pucelle. It’s embarrassing.”

“But you’re a real magical girl, so there’s nothing to be embarrassed about.”

“Indeed,” Sister Nana agreed. “I’d like to see your poses as well, Snow White.”

“You…do? Okay, then…ahem. For love! For friendship! For the world! Anywhere and anytime, I will solve your troubles! The magical girl who takes on every request: Snow White!”

“Oooh!”

“The sequence of poses is quite amazing.”

“I like it.”

“The movements are so complex, but you pulled them off so smoothly,” said La Pucelle.

“Well…I practiced a lot. Hey, La Pucelle. Don’t make me the only one to do it. You show me yours, too.”

“But I haven’t come up with an original line or pose, though.”

“Booo, you’re no fun.”

“I see…,” said Sister Nana. “Well, then, how about we try coming up with some right now?”

“That’s a great idea!” said Snow White.

“C’mon, you guys don’t have to force it…”

“This isn’t forcing it,” said Sister Nana. “If we all pool our knowledge, I’m sure we’ll get good ideas out of it. For example, Winterprison, what sort of pose would you do?”

“Huh?” said Winterprison.

“Please, give it a try.”

“O-okay… Um, hmm… In that case, I’d plant my feet like this and spin around my arms and… Traaans…form! Hyah!”

“That…wasn’t very magical girl–like…,” said Sister Nana.

“Yeah, more like a tokusatsu hour on TV,” said La Pucelle.

“Sorry…”

“O-oh, no… Please don’t apologize,” said Sister Nana.

“Yeah!” Snow White agreed. “Let’s all brainstorm something

together.”

The four magical girls’ discussion continued a long while after that. Privately, La Pucelle was thankful to her magical-girl friends for putting so much serious thought into her poses.

Snow White mobilized all her knowledge of magical-girl anime old and new, racking her brain. “The catchphrase from *Help Me! Hiyoko-Chan!* is good because it’s such a contrast from how she’s normally a crybaby, right? So then how about if you were normally always crying, La Pucelle?”

Sister Nana proposed making up a narrative for her character. “A dragon’s curse is gradually turning you into a dragon. Occasionally even your mind starts being affected, and you lose sight of yourself, and in despair, you fall into darkness… Don’t you think that’s a good one?”

Winterprison came up with the basic plan for her. “Let’s have some intense actions to make it a moving spectacle. And for that, first of all, you have to train yourself to be able to handle those intense actions. I figure practicing that while also training to protect those dearest to you would be killing two birds with one stone.”

All sorts of various arguments were put forth, leading to a fierce exchange. There were some blips in the discussion, like how at one point Tama showed up in the chat room, got scared, and immediately left, but in the end they were able to come up with a wonderful catchphrase that satisfied all of them.

“I come forth! And draw my blade!” Using her chat room avatar, which had not only short limbs but also limited movement, La Pucelle executed the actions beautifully as she drew her sword. “The magic knight, La Pucelle, is here! Villains who suck blood and devour flesh, feel my holy blade of judgment!”

She quickly raised her sword aloft, and then a few seconds later the chat room was filled with the applause command.

“Cool!”

“Yeah, I like it.”

“It’s wonderful.”

“Thanks so much, everyone. Seriously, I appreciate it a lot.”

Thanking everyone again, La Pucelle left the chat, and her partner Snow White followed after her. But the story did not end there.

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The logs in the magical-girl chat were saved, which multiple magical girls browsed that evening. The discussion had left an impression on all of them to some extent. Anyone who had played *Magical Girl Raising Project* to the point of becoming a magical girl would be somewhat invested in magical-girl culture. They wanted to pull off beautiful and cool poses and catchphrases just like the magical girls they admired and looked forward to seeing on TV every week. The girls browsing the logs really believed all that.

☆ La Pucelle

They'd all put their heads together to think up a catchphrase and pose for her. Personal bias aside, La Pucelle thought they had turned out great, on par with those from any magical-girl anime.

But she did get the feeling they leaned a little too heavily in the battle heroine direction. That was fine if she was doing them on her own. La Pucelle was a knight, and knights were made for fighting. The problem was that when she did them with Snow White, their poses and catchphrases were too different, and they wouldn't mesh. Snow White's were gentle and pleasant, while La Pucelle's were sharp and crisp. This wouldn't match. She couldn't tell Snow White to change hers to match La Pucelle, so La Pucelle should come up with a catchphrase and pose that would match hers.

La Pucelle wasn't going to throw away this catchphrase and pose when they'd all gone to the trouble to come up with them together. So she decided to have two sets, and use one or the other depending on the situation. She could manage both by using one for everyday life scenes and one for battle scenes.

"Um, Koyuki will be over here, so I… Maybe like this? Or I could shift that before or after… The sword's dangerous, so I'll go with a reverse grip and hold it in this hand… That'll sort of balance things out… Maybe we ought to…s-stand closer together? No, actually, that's kinda almost *too* close… Not like I have any ulterior motives, of course!"

After spending the entire night thinking over the sequence, Souta Kishibe fell asleep in math class the next day and wound up experiencing the humiliation of being made to stand in the hallway,

even as a middle schooler.

☆ **Sister Nana**

“The chat yesterday was fun, wasn’t it?” asked Sister Nana.

“Yeah,” Winterprison agreed.

“And then after that we stopped by the video store and rented *The Bandit and the Princess*. That was fun, too.”

“It’s been so long since I’ve seen it. It was a lot different from what I remembered. When I was little, I was so afraid of the bandit, but watching it now, he actually isn’t so bad.”

“You’ll kidnap me like that, too, won’t you, Winterprison?”

“Uh, well, I… Anyway, uh, about La Pucelle. Good thing we managed to come up with an original pose and catchphrase for her, huh?”

“Yes, indeed… Watching her, I felt rather envious.”

“How so?”

“I mean, we don’t have poses or catchphrases, do we?”

“I don’t really think we need them.”

“Please, don’t say that. It makes me sad.”

“Sad? Was it? I don’t mean to make you sad, Sister Nana.”

“I appreciate that, Winterprison. But might you at least consider the idea for me?”

“All right. How about this? ‘My name is Winterprison, protector of Her Holiness. You’re looking cute as ever, Sister Nana.’”

“The first part was fine…but wouldn’t you say that last remark is a bit too personal?”

“‘You who would harm this holy lady, your destination is a jail of ice, and I, Weiss Winterprison, shall be your jailer. Everything I do is for your sake, Sister Nana.’”

“Can you stop bringing up my name? It sounds more like you’re talking to me.”

“I *am* talking to you, so it’s fine.”

“I think normally, these catchphrases are supposed to be all-purpose, so you can say them to anyone.”

“I just don’t feel the need to introduce myself to anyone but you.”

“Oh, my… I’m delighted.”

“Ha-ha.”

“Tee-hee.”

“Oh, you.”

“Tee-hee-hee-hee.”

☆ Peaky Angels

“Sis, sis, did you see the chat log on this day?”

“I did, I did! Just what the heck were these guys doing?”

“Practicing their entrance scenes is so dumb, huh.”

“Rehearsing the same stuff over and over, it’s like, is this a preschool talent show, or what?”

“Seriously. We could do something way cooler and way more tasteful.”

“Totally, totally, we totally could. We’d nail it no matter what.”

“You’re magi-flexible, sis.”

“We’re adaptable like that because our ability is transformation. Like we’re barely toeing the line of legality in a way other magical girls can’t imitate.”

“You’re magi-illegal, sis.”

“The two of us together are invincible, right?”

“You’re magi-invincible, sis.”

“So I come out from the right side like this.”

“So then I’m on the left, huh?”

“Call us and here we come!”

“Even if you don’t call, you’ll still get some!”

“We’re number one!”

“The Peaky…Angels!”

“Zip!”

“Zip, zip!”

“Pooose!”

“Cool!”

“Hey, you two!” a different voice interrupted.

“Ack, you startled me!”

“Oh, it’s Ruler.”

“What do you mean, ‘Oh’? Good grief, you two are such fools. You’ll never get anywhere if you get so worked up over irrational nonsense like poses and catchphrases all the time. Have a little more ambition as magical girls, and as people, too. All right? You got that?”

“Tsk.”

“Come on, why d’you have to gripe about our poses? We worked so hard to come up with those.”

“And you pose every single time you use your magic, too…”

“Did you say something?”

“Nothiiing!”

“Nooope!”

☆ **Top Speed**

“On Team Top Speed! First-generation boss Top Speed! Talk shit, get hit!”

“…What the…?”

“Look, Ripple, it’s the pose and catchphrase everyone’s talkin’ about now! Badass, right?”

“Yours doesn’t seem like a magical-girl thing…”

“Ya think? I thought it was pretty good, though.”

“And in the first place, what’s Team Top Speed…?”

“Well, it’s you and me.”

“I don’t remember joining this team…”

“Sheesh, hot and cold as ever.”

“Tsk.”

“C’mon now, don’t be mad, Ripple. I’ll help ya come up with a cool pose and catchphrase.”

“I don’t need them…”

“Really? Don’t ya?”

“No.”

“Aww, I think ya do, though.”

☆ **Ripple**

Ripple wouldn’t say that a magical girl didn’t need a pose and catchphrase. But that only applied to magical girls in anime, and not those in real life. A real-life magical girl did not need a pose and a catchphrase—because they were embarrassing. Just thinking about being forced to use them made her shiver in horror.

But in the chat log, Snow White’s pose and catchphrase had worked so well. Maybe because she was more like an anime magical girl than a real-life one. Yes, that had to be it. If other magical girls

did such a thing, it would obviously look like a disgrace.

Lounging around in her room, Kano transformed into Ripple on a whim, and for no real reason stood in front of her full-length mirror, gazing at the form reflected there—at her sculpted face, the perfectly balanced proportions, her costume. It was a bold image, but also one that suited her.

The magic ninja: Ripple.

"The f-fate of… The fate…of a…"

No. Don't be shy. Throw away your shame. Ripple filled her tone with spirit and tensed her gut. Sticking up her index and middle fingers, she sandwiched shuriken between them. Getting down on one knee, she brought her right hand in front of her face.

"The fate of a villain is to live in darkness, to die in darkness! And the fate of the ninja is to finish off those who make to leave their cave in search of light, the most villainous of all! Before you die, the magic ninja Ripple shall let you witness her secret technique. Take this as your gift to the lord of the underworld!"

"Ripple, what are you doing, pon?"

Ripple, who had been facing the mirror, slowly turned around. A hologram rose up from the magical phone that she'd left on top of her futon, and the mascot was staring over at her with his expressionless eyes.

Ripple silently got to her feet, picked up the magical phone, and turned it off. She sighed, detransformed, crawled into her futon, shoved a pillow against her face, and screamed.

"AHHHHHHHH!"

☆ Calamity Mary

Seeing the chat log everyone had been talking about, she thought: *These kids are crazy.*

Shrieking and chittering together, they babbled on about how magical girls needed poses and catchphrases. She couldn't understand it. They said they'd think some up.

Had there ever been a scene in *Little Witch Riccabel* where the protagonist had thought up her own transformation poses or catchphrases? Searching all through the memories of her childhood and thinking back, Naoko found no such thing. Riccabel didn't have to think about it—it had always been there.

Naoko Yamamoto set her glass on the table and stood. Then she chanted the spell that had naturally come to mind when Fav had told her that she had become a magical girl.

“Calamity Miracle Kuru Kururin! Transform into the magical gunslinger, Calamity Mary!”

She posed and looked in the mirror. The beautiful, ferocious lady gunslinger was reflected back at her. This was how you had to use a spell and transformation pose. It wasn’t something to use as a topic for chummy conversation with your buddies. You should just use it in secret, without anyone ever seeing.

Calamity Mary gave a thin smile and winked at the mirror.

This is an older, unpublished story released
for the first time in this book.

The Yakuza-Angel Business

This story is set shortly before the magical candy competition begins.

Anime

SPOILER-O-METER

Read this after watching **episode three** of the anime, pon!

The Yakuza-Angel Business

The black leather seat was softer than her sofa at home, and nice to sit on. There was so little vibration and sound that if she didn't look out the window, she'd forget she was in a car on the road. However—was she comfortable? The answer was no. The grim man with the shaved head sitting in the driver's seat, the young man with crossed arms and blond swept-up hair in the passenger seat, and the man sitting beside her with a beard and an aggressive yakuza perm were all completely silent, never opening their mouths, not even glancing over at her.

An air of silence and heaviness filled the car, but she didn't feel like starting any conversations. How had things wound up like this? How could she escape this predicament? Her thoughts ran around in circles; there was no glimmer of hope to be seen. But she couldn't let them know she was freaking out, so she put on an act like she wasn't thinking anything, leaning back in her seat as she gazed out at the scenery sweeping past.

"We're here." The guy with the shaved head finally spoke, only to give her information she didn't want to hear. "Please do just as we discussed."

There was no discussion! Yunael, transformed into Calamity Mary, cried inside her head.

☆ **Yunael**

The sisters Mina and Yuna Amasato were often treated as a two-in-one package deal, as one set.

They did things together because they had many overlapping interests. They wore similar clothes for fun and hung out together because it was fun, and each sort of knew what was on the other's mind. With so many reasons for them to stay together, they didn't live apart. They didn't think much about being treated as a set, and

the two of them were together wherever they went, to the point where even if one got a boyfriend, the other still wouldn't go away, so their romantic relationships had never lasted long. Nevertheless, the two of them were satisfied with this state of affairs.

Mina and Yuna had also simultaneously become magical girls through *Magical Girl Raising Project*. They'd started the game because it was free to play, and they'd both gotten really into it, forgetting day and night as they became obsessed, until one day a holographic mascot character had said to them, "This is the first case where a pair of twins became magical girls, pon."

With the introduction of their duo name of "Peaky Angels," they were a set even as magical girls. And because they even shared an ID on their magical phones, their attempt at sockpuppeting on the message boards had been exposed. However, that blunder had only strengthened their bond, and thereafter, the twin angels grew even closer as magical girls. And there was one more reason they'd gotten closer: They now had a common enemy.

After finishing their magical-girl work, the Peaky Angels came straight back from Ouketsuji to the apartment where they lived. And straight back meant literally straight back—they took the shortest route possible, flying in a beeline above N City, returning through their seventh-floor window. Even once they got home, they stayed in their magical-girl forms and flitted around near the ceiling, chattering noisily.

It was always like this on days when Ruler chewed them out. The Peaky Angels would get angry, freak out, wail, and enthusiastically trash-talk Ruler. They'd whine and complain about her incessantly: "What a nasty woman," or "I'd like to make her cry," or "One day, I wanna give her a taste of her own medicine."

Those days when Ruler yelled at them, the twins always had animated discussions talking smack about her, but then ultimately would come to the sad conclusion that they couldn't oppose her, thus bringing their discussion to an end. But on this particular day, things were a bit different.

"Honestly, who the heck does she think she is?"

"She thinks she's the Great Ruler, doesn't she? That's how you'd probably answer, if she asked."

"For sure, she's sooo arrogant."

"It's way past forgivable, right?"

“Ugh, it pisses me off!”

“It totally does!”

“It’d feel so good to sock her one.”

“But she’s real strong.”

When the twins had become magical girls, Ruler had been the one to take on the role of their mentor. Thinking back now, that had clearly just been unnecessary busybodying, and Yunael figured that if Sister Nana or whoever had been their mentor instead, then they’d have more freedom as magical girls. But unfortunately, newbies couldn’t choose their mentors. After going through the experience of having their bodily freedom robbed from them and being controlled—an experience they never wanted to repeat—the twins had stopped trying to openly defy her. They had been forced onto this team by authoritarian means (though if more democratic means had been used, the twins would have won by majority rule) and were ordered around, and whenever there was something Ruler didn’t like, she’d take it out on them, yelling and screaming at them over the littlest mistakes. There was nothing good about having Ruler as a mentor, but given how strong she was, rebellion wasn’t an option for the twins.

“Ruler’s a moron!”

“Ruler’s a dummy!”

“Ruler’s a ninny!”

“A dim bulb!”

“A dunderhead!”

“A lamebrain!”

It wasn’t as if they were incapable of seeing the futility of letting off steam by insulting her when she wasn’t around, but if they got defiant and did something in her presence, Ruler would fly into a rage. And if the twins bore the brunt of that anger, they didn’t think they could resist. Their own magic was a peaceful kind, compared to Ruler’s—nothing scary about it.

But still—*still*—couldn’t they somehow strike a blow in retaliation?

“Okay, then I guess it’s about time for this week’s observation report. Did you find out any weaknesses of hers?”

“How about making her eat lots of salt? She’s always so angry all the time, so like, if we give her high blood pressure, maybe her arteries’ll pop and she’ll collapse.”

“Isn’t that a little too roundabout?”

“Okay, then, how about making her eat tons of sweet stuff instead? I hear diabetes has like, lots of complications and stuff; it’s super-scary.”

“That’s still roundabout.”

Even as the Peaky Angels complained and whined, they were also fumbling around looking for a way to knock the wind out of Ruler’s sails. They’d also considered getting help from the others, Swim Swim and Tama, but adding allies would make their secret that much easier to leak. They couldn’t even be sure they could call those two allies in the first place. Swim Swim was the biggest sycophant, and she didn’t seem to be at all dissatisfied with Ruler’s reign. Tama was too timid to be of any help; if Ruler tried to pry any information out of her, she probably wouldn’t be able to take it and would spill their whole rebellion plan.

The twins didn’t need any allies other than themselves. Their numbers were few, but they could trust each other more than anyone.

“So did you have a better scheme, sis?” Yunael asked her older twin.

“Well, actually…I do!”

“You do?! For real?! I thought you were just complaining because you had nothing to offer!”

“Hey, *that’s* what you thought? So mean!”

“Come on, come on, just tell me!”

“So like, at the beginning of the week, Fav called us, right? He was like, ‘A lot of you girls have low participation rates in the chat, so I want you to be more serious about joining in, pon.’”

“Oh, yeah, yeah. That verbal tic of his is sooo annoying.”

“And that time he was like, ‘Calamity Mary in particular has basically never participated, pon,’ right?”

“Yeah, he did say that.”

“So you caught that, too, huh, sis? And, like, Ruler got this reeeeeally nasty look on her face when she heard Calamity Mary’s name.”

“Ahh, so they don’t get along?”

“So then, like, I tried something out. Right before leaving that day, I said to Ruler: ‘Y’know, I saw someone today on the corner by Takino Buddhist Goods who looked like Calamity Mary. I wonder if that was her.’”

“Uh-huh, uh-huh. So then what?”

“Ruler was *super*-shocked. And then after that, she kept bugging me about it like crazy, too. Like, ‘Was it really Mary? What was she doing? What direction did she come from? What direction did she leave in?’”

“What the heck?! Is she scared of her?”

“You got it! Ruler is totally freaked out by Mary. We heard Mary is super-strong, right? Sister Nana also said something like that once. Ruler’s strong, too, but this means Mary is dangerous enough that even Ruler is scared of her.”

“This could be some real useful intel… But isn’t it dangerous to ask Mary for anything? Like, I heard that if you even get close to her territory, she’ll shoot. Though I also heard that from Sister Nana.”

“Yeah. It’d be totally insane to get tangled up with someone even more dangerous because we wanna get back at Ruler. But that’s why big sis here thought up a way to use Mary without ever coming into contact with her.”

“Ohh, for real? So what do we do?”

“You, Yuna, transform into Mary to freak out Ruler.”

“Ohh!”

“Let’s just make it so we give her a glimpse, so she doesn’t find out it was us who did it. Seeing how freaked she was before, even a brief look at Mary should be enough to knock her off her high horse. It’ll be like psychological warfare.”

“Wow! You’re so magi-cool, sis!” Yunael said. “But you don’t think Mary’ll find out?”

“Mary doesn’t know what our magic is, and besides, Ruler wouldn’t go contact Mary, right?”

“Oh, I get it, I get it. So then it’s the perfect plan!”

The two angels chattered excitedly as they bounced around near the ceiling, and then a wing hit the lampshade, scattering dust all around. That reminded them that they hadn’t cleaned lately, and the two of them took out a vacuum cleaner and duster and such out of the closet and started cleaning, and as they moved around, their mouths never stopped, either, discussing their plan to scare Ruler.

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The elder sister, Minael, could transform into any object, while the

younger sister, Yunael, could turn into any creature. Ultimately, they merely imitated the appearance—for example, if Yunael were to transform into Ruler, she couldn't actually use Ruler's magic. But for this plan, imitation alone would suffice.

But in order to do a proper imitation, they couldn't skimp on preparation. And given who their subject was this time, even just investigating was super-dangerous. The pair watched a string of movies: famous ones about warring Italian Mafia families, Japanese direct-to-video yakuza flicks, kung fu action films about rival Chinese crime syndicates. Then, with firm determination in their hearts, they went into action.

The Peaky Angels confirmed Sister Nana's information in the chat log, then went to stake out the front of the high-rise where Calamity Mary was frequently sighted. Since they'd be in big trouble if she found out they were in her territory, Yunael waited in the form of a crow on top of a power line, and Minael as a wrench they'd established had been forgotten on top of a telephone pole by a repairman.

The two of them lacked patience. And a stakeout required patience. Waiting and waiting for Mary when they didn't even know when she would come was basically like a form of penance for them, but nevertheless, they restrained the urge to abandon the task and continued the stakeout. No matter how painful a struggle it was, the twins waited patiently for the sake of striking back at Ruler and scaring her. They got blasted by strong winds and fully drenched in a sudden downpour, but still they believed there would be relief at the end of their suffering. The twins encouraged each other as they continued their waiting game, and thirty minutes after they began their stakeout, finally, the person they'd been waiting for appeared.

She was dressed in the style of a gunslinger out of a Western, but with a risqué bikini top, while on the bottom she wore a skirt that was about as short as it could get—her figure was beautifully full to the point that the term "magical girl" wasn't really appropriate, with a healthy bounce to it.

From atop the telephone pole, Yunael fixed her eyes on Mary, who took bold strides, as if there was no need for her to feel reserved with anyone, her sheriff's badge swaying along with her voluptuous breasts. Her expression was full of confidence, as if she were at her peak and on top of the world. Yunael firmly impressed

in her mind Mary's facial features, her hairstyle, her figure, her clothing, and even every single one of her accessories. She had to remember these things with complete accuracy in order to transform into a specific person. If Ruler found them out because one thing had been slightly off, they'd lose everything. Footsteps light, Mary entered the building, and Yunael the crow picked up the wrench in her mouth and slowly descended, detransforming behind a plastic bucket in an alley.

They were all ready. All that was left was to see if she could pull off the transformation well. Yunael had only ever turned into another magical girl once. She'd turned into Ruler and done all sorts of bad things as part of a plot to destroy her reputation, only to be quickly found out since "You're the only one who could do that, Yunael." Nevertheless, her failure had proved useful for building experience in transforming into a different magical girl.

She recalled Mary, whom she'd seen just a moment ago. She pictured the movements of her muscles and the flow of her hair. Yunael's body glowed, then changed form, growing, taking shape, and she stood up. Now she ought to be a perfect replica of Calamity Mary. From what she could see of her limbs and torso, there was no problem there. What remained was the head. Yunael-Mary strode out of the back alley and looked left and right, searching for anything she could use to see herself in, and, noticing the glass door on a building, she headed over there.

She checked out her appearance in the glass—lifting her legs, rotating her arms, and striking a pose. A wink, a thrown kiss, a double peace sign. The glass door reflected a perfect Calamity Mary, not an inch different from what Yunael had seen earlier.

"Boss, you came all the way out here to wait for us?"

Hearing a man's voice right up close, Yunael turned around wondering what was up to see a man with a violent aura: a loud red shirt, thick rings on his fingers, hair that defied gravity in an even louder color than his shirt. He was looking straight at her. Yunael glanced around, and, seeing there wasn't anyone else around he could be talking to, she realized, *Ohh, he thinks I'm Mary.*

"Then we'll be countin' on you again today."

"Ahh, um."

The man squinted one eye. "Boss, your voice… You got a cold?"

"Oh, um, yeah."

"Should I get you some medicine?"

“No, it’s fine.”

“All right, if you don’t need any. This way, then. I’ve brought the car over.”

This is bad, Yunael thought. But she couldn’t run away. If she ran off now and caused a commotion, then the real Calamity Mary, who had gone into the building, might come back out, and if that happened, there was an 80–90 percent chance Yunael would get killed. The other 10–20 percent was the chance of something worse than death. Calamity Mary was stronger than Ruler; she was someone even Ruler was scared of. It’d be best to get at least a little ways away from here before making her escape. With that in mind, Yunael left behind the wrench (who had missed her moment to detransform) and got into the black foreign car.

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Before Yunael could even really figure out what was going on or seize an opportunity to get away, she was taken to the edge of town, where they arrived at a cement factory. When Yunael-Mary staggered out of the car, all the men bowed their heads.

“The usual, if you please, boss.”

It would have been so much easier if she could just ask them, *What do you mean, the usual?*

The men seemed to find it suspicious that she didn’t respond, as one timidly raised his head. “Umm…you don’t mind, right?”

Yunael considered how to answer, but couldn’t think of any good plan at all. As the silence continued, the confusion and bafflement on the men’s faces increased, and, seeing that, Yunael-Mary cleared her throat. Time for a snap decision.

“Um…boss?”

“You think I can’t do it unless you come ask me for it?”

The men stepped back as if they’d been repelled, then bowed their heads at an even greater angle than before. Yunael-Mary pressed her right hand to her chest. A dizziness came along with the feeling of her heart pounding.

The car was stopped in the factory parking lot, and, sandwiched in between the men, she went inside. There, some scary-looking men who didn’t seem much different from Mary’s men came out to meet her, and they began a discussion.

That said, it was less a discussion and more an exchange of threats. Criminal sorts of lingo like “turf” and “the goods” and “hustle” flew back and forth like it was nothing. The factory had been closed and all the machines removed, leaving only ruins. There was a room with sofas in it that looked like it had been an office or something—on the wall hung a calendar from a brothel, and there was a cardboard box packed with cell phones, plus a glossy black sideboard, a thick wooden table, and even a safe that seemed sturdy. It seemed they’d made this some kind of base, but she didn’t want to think about exactly *what* sort.

The discussion continued. The men who’d brought her there were winning. The reason for that was Mary. They were threatening the other gang, with the absolute violence that was Calamity Mary backing them. The other guys hadn’t given up, and they were pushing through somehow, but their attention never left Mary. They kept glancing at her again and again, but then, when their eyes met, they’d panic and look away.

The man with the shaved head who had been the driver quietly approached Mary’s chair, leaning in to whisper, “These jackasses ain’t givin’ you proper respect, boss.”

The smell of tobacco on his breath made her grimace. More than anything, however, she was so frightened that she didn’t know what to say.

“Could you do that thing to shut ’em up for us?”

Yunael-Mary turned to the man. He had a nasty smile on his face, and his bald head shone dully.

That thing. What was “that thing”? She glanced to the side to see that the men over there were also eyeing her. On the other side, and behind her, and in front of her, all the men in the room were looking at her—the men who had brought her in with expressions of expectation, the men who had come to meet them with expressions of fear. They observed her closely from every direction, so as not to miss even a single muscle twitch.

She didn’t have time to think. Simply remembering the suspicious expressions on the men from before made her feel like her heart would burst. Yunael-Mary raised up her right leg, and all the men’s eyes focused there. Once enough gazes had gathered on her raised foot, her thigh, and the juncture directly above that, she swung it down to slam her heel into the table, cracking open the thick wood with a single strike. The eyes of both enemy and ally

widened as they clung to their chairs. Any magical girl—not just Mary, but even Yunael, who was weaker than Tama or Swim Swim—had legs strong enough to do this much.

Crushing the remains of the table underfoot, Yunael-Mary stood. “You’re asking me to shut them up for you? In other words, you’re giving *me* orders?”

The bald guy shook his head violently, like a spasm.

Yunael-Mary spun back the other way, whipping her hair, and next, she asked the men sitting opposite her a question. “I heard you’re not giving me proper respect. That true?”

Some of the men looked down, some looked up at the ceiling, some looked out the window, but all averted their eyes from Yunael-Mary. Was that muttering under the breath a show of courage, or was someone making an excuse?

Though her heart was hammering way too hard, Yunael-Mary swept her glare slowly over the room from one corner to another so she would appear as arrogant as possible. “Mind if I go to the roof to get some air?”

“Uh… Boss, the discussion is just about over,” one man said.

That made the men on the other side start griping. “No it ain’t. You don’t get to decide that.”

“Shut up! If we say it’s over, then it’s over.”

“Don’t give me that shit! We’re still talking.”

The men seemed ready to start another dispute, and though Yunael-Mary was privately frightened, she didn’t show it on her face, shrugging with a look like she was fed up. “I’m getting some air. Be right back.”

Nobody tried to stop her.

Leaving behind the men cursing at each other, she closed the door behind her and did a tiny pump with her fist. She walked quietly until she was away from the room, and then once she was about thirty feet away she sped up, and once she was farther she ran up one, two, three, four flights of stairs, coming out to the roof. Finally she could get away. She looked around like, *Nobody’s watching, right?* And her eyes met those of another.

A man was there. He wasn’t the violent type, like those who had surrounded Yunael-Mary only moments ago. The collar of his thin T-shirt was stretched and loose, his cotton pants were worn at the cuffs, his hair and beard were wildly overgrown, and his cheeks were gaunt. His beat-up sneakers were absolutely waterlogged; he’d

taken them off and placed them in front of the iron railing along with a white envelope that read *last will and testament*. The man himself was standing on the outside of the railing.

His lifeless eyes glanced at Yunael-Mary for a moment. He then sighed and leaned out over the edge of the roof—Yunael-Mary did a thirty-foot leap to grab his arm.

"What're you doing?!"

"Let me go! Just let me die; it's all hopeless."

"Why?! Of all the times and places—why?!"

"Well, it's partly out of spite. The bank won't lend me a cent, and the factory boss and his whole family ran off in the night after they got fleeced by a high-interest loan from the yakuza, and after all my hard work at this factory, I lost my income, and now I'm living a life of debt. If I jump off here, then that criminal scum'll get a nasty sight to see and it'll make them feel something awful, and if I die, I can repay all my debt, while the rest of the insurance money will be sent to my parents in the country as my final act of filial piety…"

"Don't do it, seriously, don't. These guys are devils in human skin. They're not gonna feel bad if you die. They'll call you pathetic and laugh at you. And on top of that, listen, you dying on their turf'll be a hassle for them, so they'll bury your body in the woods or toss it in the ocean or something. And since there won't be a body to find, you'll be treated like a missing person, and it'll take a bunch of time for the insurance payout. That's what they do on TV, anyway. Seriously, I can't recommend it."

The man's shoulders slumped, and he breathed a deep sigh. "So then I guess I'll do it at the bank."

"*That's* your decision?! Just give up on this whole plan!"

"Shut up! Why're you stopping me?!"

"'Cause if I sit here and let you die, I'll feel terrible!"

"And what the hell is your deal here in the first place?! Go do your little cosplaying somewhere else!"

"You think I'd wear an outfit like this for kicks?!"

The both of them glared at each other, shoulders heaving. Yunael-Mary broke eye contact first, pulling out her magical phone. "C'mon, tell me your address."

"Huh?"

"I'll bring some money there."

"What're you talking about? As if you could actually do that."

“Well…” Yunael looked over toward the Kounan district. There was a white object flying straight toward them. It was a largish paper airplane—like if you folded one from a newspaper, it’d be about that big. The paper airplane just about ran into a crow on the way, and it flapped its wings wide to intimidate the bird and drive it off before leisurely resuming its flight. This was clearly not the way a paper airplane would fly. And its movements were familiar to Yunael.

“Help’s here.”

◇◇◇

Yunael took three deep breaths. With her right hand, she firmly gripped the handle of a *guandao*, whispering to herself, *I can do it, I know I can do it*, while with her left she twisted the knob in her grasp to open the door. The men inside were still exchanging threats with one another, but they looked shocked to see Yunael show up and began rising from their seats. Before they could stand, however, Yunael took action.

“Scum! I’ll kill you all!”

Randomly tossing in the Cantonese she’d just learned in her second foreign language class, she raved wildly, slicing around everywhere, walls and sofa included. They were under attack by an incredibly bizarre character: an eight-foot tall man, naked above the waist, bulging with muscles, sporting a Manchu hairstyle and with a rag wrapped around his waist, swinging a massive *guandao* around. The scene turned into a chaotic mess of enemy and ally all trying to escape. Yunael had focused on intimidation in the creation of this character, basing him on one from a kung fu flick she’d seen the other day. Either her reference base had been excellent, or her transformation and acting were just that good, as the character quickly broke her opponents’ morale. The men dropped all courage and pride, yelling things like “Call for the boss!” and “Don’t run off first!” and “Don’t step on my foot!” as they stumbled over themselves to escape. Yunael closed the door, and Minael changed from the *guandao* to her tiny angel form.

Yunael laid her hand atop the safe. It was so large that, with a little effort, Yunael could shove herself into it. It seemed fairly sturdy, too. With the twins’ strength, it’d take time to crack open. It

wasn't something to do here.

"Okay, then, let's get this done," said Yunael. "I'll pretend to be Mary and fool the rest of the guys here somehow, so you take this safe, okay, sis? There's a guy at this address who could die at any minute—give it to him."

"What kinda mission is that?" Minael demanded.

"Come on, just do it… Wait, wait, hold on. Even if there's cash inside, it'd be bad if the cops already have the serial numbers on it. Could you tell the guy that he's not to use the cash until it's been laundered?"

"Why're you being so cautious? Is this like that movie *Outrage* or what?"

"We've gotta be cautious, or we'll be in trouble!"

"I don't wanna carry something this heavy while flying."

"Just do it! Now! Before they come back—"

They heard the sound of a car engine from outside, followed by brake sounds, and then a call of, "Boss, what are you doing in there?!" Minael and Yunael exchanged glances and saw each other instantly blanch. This wasn't the time to be standing around.

"Turn into a wrapping cloth, sis," said Yunael.

"Huh? Why a wrapping cloth?"

Once Minael was transformed, Yunael wrapped the safe in the Minael cloth and slung it over her shoulder. She opened the window and made sure there was nobody around, and, with the safe over her shoulder, she leaped through it and escaped.

"Hey! So why a wrapping cloth?"

"If I took the safe as is, it'd totally stick out like a sore thumb, right?" Yunael pointed out. "We need to hide it while we run, and be sneaky about it."

"But like, I made it an arabesque pattern. Now you just look like a stereotypical burglar."

"It's fine, burglars these days don't use that pattern anymore."

Yunael started running. She could feel the coldness of the safe on her shoulder through the cloth.

She ran. She just ran. Flying to get away would be a bad idea. If they were spotted returning to angel form to escape, that would be like telling everyone who the culprits were. Plus, if she turned into a giant bird or a pterodactyl or something and then Mary were to shoot at them from below while they were wobbling away through the air with the safe, it'd be a disaster.

With the safe on her shoulder, Yunael attempted to leap over the factory wall in a single bound, but didn't make it. Throwing out one arm, she got her hand on the top of the wall, somehow pulling herself up. Yunael wasn't suited for this kind of dramatic action. This was the sort of thing Winterprison should be made to do.

"There he is!"

Yunael smothered a scream. They'd already been found.

"That's what happens when you pick such a conspicuous body," said Minael.

"You're right! I should've transformed into someone else to get away! If you'd realized that, sis, you should have told me!"

"You started running before I could, Yuna!"

They didn't have the time to be stopping to bicker. They didn't even have the time to detransform.

"Are you from Jin Bang Mei?!"

"Shit! Why do we gotta have our safe robbed over a fight with the Tetsuwa Organization?!"

The men came after them, cursing. There were no buildings around the factory where they could hide. No way Yunael could hide this massive build in the weedy open lot or in the dried-up rice fields. As she kept on running, she regretted having transformed into this enormous thing in order to threaten the men. Was that sound like gunpowder exploding she heard behind her gunfire? Was it the men shooting at her, or was Calamity Mary—?

Shaking off these ideas she didn't want to have, Yunael cut across a field that lay fallow, trampled over a gravel path, and ran, just desperately ran, until she turned a corner, stopped, and flung herself to the side, barely dodging the black minivan that nearly hit her.

The minivan left black tire marks on the pavement as it came to a stop, the door opening in one smooth motion.

"Get in!" A man in the incredibly fishy combo of sunglasses and a surgical mask beckoned to her urgently.

"Huh? Uh, huh?"

"Hurry up! They're comin'!" He grabbed her hand, pulling her massive body into the minivan, and the door closed. The man in the sunglasses raised his right hand, and, without understanding why, Yunael went along with it, offering her right hand as well, and the two of them high-fived.

Then the man in sunglasses raised his left hand, and the driver,

who was also in sunglasses and a mask, twisted around to give him a high five, too, and the two of them whooped for joy.

"We did it!"

"Did you see those bastards' faces? Pathetic."

"That's what happens when you try to team up with the Tetsuwa Org."

Yunael couldn't understand what was going on here, but these two—for now, at the very least—did not seem to be enemies. Through the tinted rear window, she could see the factory growing distant. It seemed they'd managed to escape their predicament for the time being.

"You work fast, too, huh?"

"Yeah, I'll say. And you're damn jacked, too."

Yunael didn't really get it, but she figured she'd agree vaguely with some grunts and "Uh-huh"s.

"Never thought I'd see someone charge in there solo."

"I'm impressed. The Jin Bang Mei sent in a hell of a guy for backup."

"Weren't we sayin' you'd be coming here a bit later, though? It went well this time, but let's coordinate things a little better. It wouldn't kill ya to at least give us a call. We were just plannin' to keep watch here."

"Ah, yeah, well, uh-huh," said Yunael.

"You got a real high voice, man."

"Yeah, you sound like a girl."

"I get that a lot."

The nearby buildings began increasing in number and height. The vehicle was cruising toward the city. Hunched over in this vehicle that was rather small for her, Yunael breathed a sigh of relief, but then tightened her lips. She couldn't let her guard down yet. Though this was better than fighting Mary, now she had to deal with these guys somehow and escape to somewhere safe. She felt bad, after they'd saved her, but she figured once they were stopped at a light or something, she'd whack them gently enough that it wouldn't kill them, and bail.

"Hey! Look up ahead!"

The wrapping cloth talked.

What the heck are you doing, talking in front of other people?! Yunael thought, and while aggressively clearing her throat in an attempt to at least cover that up, she glanced ahead to see a girl in

a gunslinger costume, like she'd walked out of a Western, standing on the sidewalk. It was obviously Calamity Mary.

When Mary drew a gun from her holster and pointed it at them, Yunael screamed, "Ahh! Up in front! It's her!"

The man in the seat beside her punched the headrest in front of him, while the driver spat curses.

"The goddamn Tetsuwa Org's bodyguard! If we kill her, we get a bonus!"

"This ain't no problem, just keep goin' and run her down!"

"What are you thinking?!" Yunael cried. "That'll be fatal!"

"Yeah, that's the point!"

"No! That's not what I mean!"

The driver floored the gas. Everyone in the car was slammed back in their seats as the minivan suddenly accelerated, and Mary grew larger in their field of view. Seeing a twisted smile appear on Mary's face, an expression of her glee, Yunael made a decision. If she didn't run, they were going to die.

Yunael kicked open the rear door and leaped out, taking the door with her. The men were yelling something, but she saw that as no reason to stop. Using the door to cushion her landing, she hit the ground, next using it as a stepping stone to leap, not slowing even a hair as she dashed off.

She heard a series of bangs behind her, followed by the sound of a massive object that had been running at high speed rolling and then sliding. Then came the sound of a cement block wall or something being destroyed, but she didn't turn back. Ignoring the laundry hanging off a drying rod getting in her face, she leaped into a residence, went from the veranda to the living room and through the hallway and, coming into the kitchen, ran in front of a wide-eyed middle-aged woman in an apron, broke a window and rolled outside, then ran a bit farther, coming to a T intersection. A stone wall stood tall before her. This was a landmark—the only stone wall in N City was near the North Park. If she climbed to the top of this wall, she'd be in North Park. After that, Monzenmachi was just a short distance away.

Holding the safe under her left arm, Yunael started climbing the wall with only her legs and right arm. The wall was steep, but it wasn't completely vertical. Magical girls could even run up the sides of buildings that stood perpendicular to the ground, so with her strength, it wasn't like it was impossible for her to climb, even

carrying a big safe under one arm. But Yunael usually focused only on flying skills, and she didn't have many opportunities to run or jump, so it wasn't easy for her. She somehow scrambled up, getting a hand on the fence to pull herself to the top, and sighed in relief.

A playground stood in the park square, and the middle school boys sitting there in their uniforms were staring at Yunael with their mouths hanging open. Five of the boys were sitting on the seesaws and swings and stuff, while one was on the ground. Looking closely, she saw he was naked above the waist, wearing only underwear below. His white dress shirt and uniform pants were lying on the ground. He was dirty all over, and his lip was broken and bleeding.

Yunael scowled and squared her shoulders as she approached the boys with loud stomps. She slammed the safe into the ground, making the earth shake. The cloth wrapped around the safe gave a tiny cry of "Ow!"

"It's just bullshit from everyone today, huh?!"

The bullies, who already looked ready to run, all trembled and clung to the playground equipment.

Yunael grabbed one of them by the lapels and brought her face close to his. "Bullying the weak, huh. Is this kinda thing fun for you?"

The boy opened and closed his mouth a bunch of times, somehow managing to squeeze out, "We're just playing around," but Yunael slammed down the safe one more time, making his cheeks stiffen, and he closed his mouth.

The cloth was saying, "Hey, Yuna, cut it out," but Yunael ignored her, contorting her face (which was pretty scary to begin with) into a bloodcurdling expression, glaring at the kid from close enough that he could feel her breath.

"Next time you pull something like this, I'm gonna come sock you one."

The bully trembled and nodded, and when Yunael turned to look at the others, they all nodded just like him.

Finally she took the hand of the victim and pulled him up. "If they do this kind of thing again, ask for help on the message boards of the magical-girl aggregate site. A bunch of busybody types will get together to manage things for you somehow."

The boy gave her a flustered nod, and Yunael heaved up the safe, which was about one-fifth buried in the ground. When she

glanced over in the direction from which she'd come, she caught sight of a hand on the fence—someone coming into the park from the direction of the stone wall. Yunael turned around and zoomed off.

She'd lost her temper and helped that kid without thinking. It wasn't the time to be doing something like that—what the heck was she doing? Slinging the safe she'd been carrying in both arms over her back, she made it her shield as she ran, though it wouldn't do much except offer her peace of mind. The cloth let out a cry of protest, but Yunael pretended she hadn't heard it.

There was the sound of gunfire, which she was already used to hearing by now, as the earth to her left burst, and screeches from the boys ripped through the park. Yunael's own thick throat was trembling with a voiceless scream as she leaped into a lilac thicket. The safe went over the thicket, rolling along. She decided to let her big sister handle that, somehow. Right now, her own safety was her priority. Scattering leaves and breaking branches, she went deeper into the thicket, finding a place that seemed safe for the moment, and cowered there.

Yunael stayed still in the thicket and prayed. She prayed Mary would be possessed of enough intellect and rationality that she'd realize it was a bad idea to destroy the stolen safe, and that she would not fire wildly into the thicket or throw in a grenade. Thinking in a self-mocking manner that she really was an angel, with all this praying, Yunael wanted to cry, but she sucked it up.

A ray of sunlight shone in. Cutting her way through the thicket, Mary appeared. She looked down at the ground and muttered, "Got away, huh." Then she saw Yunael, and when their eyes met, Yunael was deadly anxious, but she told herself that if she moved, she would die, and kept still, not even twitching. The sound of footsteps grew distant, and after patiently waiting until she could be sure this wasn't a fake or a trap, Yunael sighed in relief, thinking, *It's okay now,* and detransformed. Returning from an ant to her angel form, she next turned into a traditional old woman who appeared to be a farmer, somewhere between her late seventies and mideighties and with a bent back, and, moving cautiously and gingerly, she left the thicket. The middle school kids must have fled, as they were already gone, and the shirt and pants were gone, too, so the bullied kid must have put on his clothing and managed to get away.

When she circled around to the other side of the thicket, where

the safe had been lying, she found two slides side by side. One was a solid concrete one, boldly stationed in place, while beside it daintily stood a slide a couple of sizes smaller.

"You don't think it's kinda implausible to have a slide next to another slide?" said Yunael.

The small slide twisted and transformed, exposing the safe hidden within, and Minael, who had been transformed into the slide, was sitting atop the safe as she sighed. "It's fine. It's like a mama slide and a baby slide."

"Hey, sis, don't turn back now. If someone caught sight of us, they might start a rumor that they saw an angel around here, and Mary would get suspicious."

"We don't want that… So then should I turn into a cloth for now?"

"Nah, even if we're not going with the arabesque pattern, they just saw the cloth… So then let's make it a basket, the kind an old lady peddler would carry. A big one that the safe'll fit in."

"Yeah, yeah, roger."

They could hear the sound of sirens on the wind. Had those middle school kids from before or some Good Samaritan called the cops like a busybody? Their sharp magical-girl ears picked up the sound of footsteps. They could hear voices saying, "I heard gunshots" and "Some kind of fight?" too.

They didn't want to stick around long. The Yunael granny heaved the basket over her shoulder and hustled off, but when Minael advised her, "Aren't you walking too steadily for your age?" Yunael adjusted her pace, leaving the area slowly and leisurely. If she was dumb and panicked and ran right now, she would draw attention. Even if she was in a hurry, she had to move like an old lady, slowly.

No matter how much of a flurry was going on around them, she couldn't be hasty. She heard running footsteps all around, but she walked calmly, and even when she heard familiar deep voices, she told herself, *There's no way we'll be found out.* The voices got closer, and the basket over her shoulder trembled. Yunael automatically muttered, "You can't move" to it.

If she got hasty, that would just make them suspicious. The Yunael granny glanced toward the voices and saw men pointing over at them. One held a square device with flashing red and yellow lights—they had a kind of radar or something. Hearing them say,

“That size,” and “The position fits,” the Yunael granny bolted.

“Damn it!” Yunael cried. “They have a transmitter on the safe?!”

“It’s that old lady!” “After her!” “Stop her before the pigs get here!” “Call the boss!” the men all yelled as they came rushing after Yunael.

Yunael thought: *It’s no use now.* They should prioritize their own safety over the safe. If Mary were to show up, then it really would get deadly.

She ran around a corner, and with a nimble leap she burst into the yard of a residence, then ran some more from there.

“Damn it! Damn it!” Yunael cursed. “If it’s got a transmitter on it, then we’ve got no choice but to leave the safe behind.”

“Tsk, too bad,” said Minael.

“We should’ve done whatever we had to to break it and take out what’s inside.”

“Huh? Why would we have to break it? It’s not locked.”

“What?” The old woman lowered the basket from her back, bringing it in front of her in her arms, and, still running at full speed, she set her chin on top of the basket. “What the heck. Why didn’t you say that, sis?”

“Uh, I thought you knew. You didn’t know?”

“I didn’t!”

“For real. I thought for sure you needed the safe itself.”

“You idiot! You’re an idiot, sis!”

Crossing over a cement block wall, Yunael raced through an alley. If it were just the men she was running from, that’d be fine. The problem was Mary. Even if they opened up the safe here and now to take the contents, that wouldn’t make Mary give up. Even without the transmitter, would they be able to shake off Mary?

She didn’t have time to think. They had to decide now. The Yunael granny ran out onto the main avenue. The men were pointing at them and yelling, “It’s that old woman!”

“Sis, spit out the safe,” said Yunael.

“It’s okay?” Minael asked.

“When you spit it out, can you open the door and spray the contents everywhere?”

“Leave it to your big sis.” The basket twisted unnaturally, dropping the safe from inside. The door of the safe was open. Since it was falling out while open, of course the contents spilled out.

Seeing that, the men got angry, and the Yunael granny ran even faster, charging into a convenience store to slide into the washroom, where she transformed into a snake that was thin like a string. Minael turned into a tiny ring, which the snake hooked around its neck to slither through the bathroom ventilation fan to the outside.

When Mary found out the giant man and old woman had gotten away, she left like she didn't care, and aside from the driver who'd brought Mary there, all the men went out to gather up the contents of the safe. When rubberneckers gathered around, the men threatened them all with their characteristic yells of "This ain't a show!" and "Get lost! Scram!" as they gathered the various lists and documents, stock certificates, gold certificates, and cash. A whole bunch of men pitched in to carry the safe back. If the police were to see them and question them, it would be over. "Hurry, hurry!" the men yelled as they rushed along. One of them—a man at the very tail end—gradually fell away from the others. Once they reached a corner, he was the only one to turn right, and when he saw that no one else was watching, he detransformed.

"…Agh… After all that, this is all we get?" Yunael, in the form of a university girl, sighed.

Minael, who'd transformed into a handbag, consoled her. "It's better than nothing. This is about a million yen, right?"

"But it sounded like that guy had some pretty bad debts. Won't this be a drop in the bucket?"

"I guess…"

Enveloped in melancholy, the pair walked sullenly to the house of the suicidal man.

Contrary to their expectations, the suicidal man threw up his hands in joy and accepted the cash. Hearing the man say this was enough for him to pay off his debts in full, student-Yunael kicked him, saying, "Don't try to kill yourself over that small a debt," while Minael detransformed out of sight to also kick him from behind and knock him down. They beat him black and blue, then gave him an earnest lecture, making the crying man promise to never attempt suicide again, and then he and Yunael went to the neighborhood *izakaya*, had some drinks, and parted ways.

Handbag-Minael had complained, “I want to drink, too,” but Yunael ignored her, and before she’d left him, the formerly suicidal man whined, “Now that I’ve spent some on drinking, it’s not enough to pay it all back anymore,” so she kicked him one more time.

Yunael and Minael had both long since forgotten about Ruler.

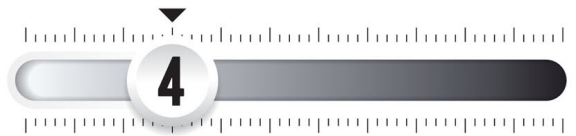
This is a new story written for this book.

The Great Leader's Distress

This story is set a while before the magical candy competition begins.

Anime

SPOILER-O-METER



Read this after watching **episode four** of the anime, pon!

The Great Leader's Distress

The group of magical girls that Ruler commanded, also known as Team Ruler, occupied a ruined temple in N City's Monzenmachi region called Ouketsuji as their gathering place. It had no antitheft devices or security service, and kids didn't even dare each other to come out here at night. In fact, there were rarely even any cars or pedestrians passing by, so it was an appropriate place for magical girls to make their base. However, some repairs were being done on the gas pipes in the neighborhood at the moment, so there were a few more passersby than normal.

If Ruler had been the only one there, this would have posed no problem, but her underlings were careless and might be seen by regular people. Any commotion they caused could potentially prevent them from using Ouketsuji for an indefinite time, and Ruler wanted to avoid that at all costs. When you had incompetent subordinates, you needed even more scrupulous risk management.

The construction on the gas pipes wouldn't go on forever. They could just go back to using Ouketsuji as their hideout once it was done. Until then, it would be best to meet in other deserted places around town as they went about their magical-girl activities.

Ruler ignored the two angels' complaint—that without their hideout, they couldn't play video games.

The meeting place on that day was the Muradana building on Kinote Street in Monzenmachi. There were more passersby compared to the Ouketsuji area, but it wasn't such a fancy building that it had nighttime management on patrol. Ruler had obtained this information from the chat, where Top Speed had commented that the roof of the building was a perfect place for magical girls to meet up. The wise could also learn from fools.

Ruler raced from roof to roof, from high-rise to high-rise, flying to the top of the Muradana building. The roof was dead silent, and

she found it was indeed true that here, you wouldn't be bothered by the eyes of others. Ruler pulled her magical phone out of her pocket and checked the time—right on schedule. She breathed out, breathed in, and muttered, "Fools," then tucked her magical phone away. She could understand if one or two people showed up late. But not one single person, except for the leader, making it on time to the meeting—that was inexcusable.

Muttering complaints about the character, motivation, proficiency, and other qualities of her subordinates, Ruler did a full circle of the roof, but even so, not a single one of them appeared. She raised her scepter at the iron fence, ready to swing it down, but then restrained herself. Smashing the fence wouldn't get her anywhere. She turned the other way and swung the scepter down into empty air, but it didn't make her feel better. In fact, she was even more irked.

"Aghh, good grief! Why isn't anyone coming?!"

There was no one to reply. Pulling out her magical phone, she checked the time: Five minutes had passed since their meeting time. She launched her schedule app and checked the place recorded there. It was the Muradana building. There was no mistaking it. So then why had nobody come?

Ruler did another three circles of the roof, and next circled three more times the other way. She watched the dreary, cloudy sky to see if perhaps the angels were coming and checked the street below to see if perhaps Tama or Swim Swim was coming, but not a single one of them appeared. Giving in to her welling anger and irritation, she stomped on the roof, and it made a nasty creaking sound, so she stopped in a panic.

Ruler leaned against the iron fence and gritted her teeth. To make someone wait was to consume wastefully the time of the one you made wait. Time was a limited resource, a finite material, a valuable commodity. It wasn't something you could just go wasting. But even if she were to go, "Who cares about those idiots" and leave, it wasn't as if that would bring back her wasted time. Maybe, if she waited another minute, or another thirty seconds, the people she was waiting for would come.

Should she contact them on their magical phones? But if they knew their leader was waiting for them impatiently, it would hurt her dignity. That wasn't good. The subordinates should be the ones to call when they were late, not the leader.

Heaving a sigh, she looked down upon the street below. With the excellent vision of a magical girl, even from the roof of a tall building, she could clearly see what was going on at ground level. The young school-age guy coming out of the convenience store was carrying something steaming in a plastic bag—probably *oden*. The middle-aged corporate-looking man who came out next wasn't holding anything. Maybe the store didn't have what he was searching for, or maybe he'd gone in just to browse the magazines. Next to exit the convenience store was a girl around high school age. She held a thin magazine in her right hand. Ruler couldn't understand why someone would expressly refuse a plastic bag and walk around with a loose magazine. It was a local magazine that was distributed for free, and plain in appearance. It had been in publication ever since Ruler—Sanae Mokuou—had been a student, but it was nothing but ads and had little to read, and even when it did include some feature, it was all stuff that was functionally ads, like, "Check these places out for solo drinks," or "The N City Ramen Shop special."

Why was that girl walking around with that sort of magazine when she was at the most exciting time of her life? Making good use of her ability to see far, Ruler rudely stared at the girl.

Maybe there was a feature that had drawn the girl's interest. Ruler tried to get a look at the article in the magazine, but the girl had already grown too distant. Magical-girl vision was high-performance, but it wasn't all-powerful. The girl turned at the intersection and went out of sight.

"Hmph." Ruler snorted, then checked her magical phone again. Ten minutes had passed.

Whenever you were waiting, whenever you were bored, worthless moments, moments like this—once some trivial thing caught your attention, if you didn't go check, it would drive you crazy. Had there been something in that free paper that had drawn the girl? Or was she just a unique person?

Ruler leaped down from the roof into the alley, bouncing off the frame of a second-floor window and then a first-floor sill in succession to break her fall, somersaulted midair, then landed on the stair by the back entrance before detransforming back into her human form, Sanae Mokuou. She'd transformed at home, so she was still in her lounge clothes, but it wasn't strange to go to the convenience store dressed like that. She figured the only problem

was that it was a little cold. Once she was in the convenience store, that problem would go away.

Adjusting the collar and sleeves of her sweater, she stuck one hand into the stomach pocket to check for her wallet. There was enough in it to buy a magazine. With a nonchalant expression on her face, Sanae stepped out from the back alley onto the main street. The convenience store was right ahead. Cutting across the street, she put her hand on the convenience store door and casually looked back—and when she saw what was behind her, she went into a coughing fit.

A group of four girls stood at the entrance to the tall building, chatting under the awning: twin angels, a girl with a dog-ear hood, and a girl in a white school swimsuit. No way—had they interpreted "meeting at the building" not as "meeting on the roof of the building" but as "meeting right in front of the building"? They couldn't understand unless she laid out every single detail for them? Just how stupid were they?

Though it was late in the evening, there were regular people going down the street, like normal. Some of them pointed at the four girls, raising their phones at them. Furious, Ruler was about to approach them when she remembered she wasn't transformed. She couldn't let them know her true identity.

She organized in her head what she should do. First she would go transform someplace where nobody was looking. Then she would contact the girls on their magical phones to summon them to the roof of the building and yell at them, "What the heck are you doing, standing there talking where regular people can see?!" and scold them for having thought they were meeting in front of the building instead of on the roof, and then further take them to task for their regular carelessness and finer errors, finishing off by telling them that such small accumulated faults were bound to lead to irredeemable failure.

She'd made up her mind as to what to do. Now she just had to do it. She had to go back to that alley and transform again.

"…Mokuou?"

And then she had to once more beat into their heads how a magical girl should conduct herself.

"You're Mokuou, aren't you?"

"Undisciplined" and "sloppy" were words used to describe people who had been in proper shape to begin with. People who

were undisciplined and sloppy to begin with, right from the base, were even worse.

"It really is you!" Someone grabbed her shoulder and turned her around. Their face was close.

Startled, Sanae automatically backed up, and her hand touched the glass door of the shop. She looked back at the other person. It was a familiar face. "Oh…Henmi."

"I haven't seen you in so long, Mokuou."

Until very recently, Sanae Mokuou had been working at a company. At the N City corporate office, she'd been constantly occupied with minor errands, frustrated at how she had no opportunity to display her capabilities in a place like this, making copies and serving tea, when the cell phone game *Magical Girl Raising Project* had made her a magical girl. Once that had happened, she'd quit the job, as if to say, *"I have no more business here."* Yuka Henmi had been a coworker at that time. She'd had the same job as Sanae, but despite that, she'd never seemed dissatisfied with her circumstances. Seeing Yuka enjoying herself every day had been so exasperating. Talk about a girl lacking all potential for growth.

And Yuka had come over without a care to talk to her, completely ignorant of Sanae's feelings. Sanae was just irritated. If someone quits a job in the middle of the season, then obviously they have some bothersome reason for it, so if you saw that person in town, you shouldn't go talk to her. But Yuka didn't think that way.

"How have you been doing, Mokuou? Send me a text sometimes, at least."

"Well, uh—"

"You disappeared so suddenly. With you gone from the office, it's all old men there, and I get lonely."

"Well…"

"Tell me your email address, at least. Let's go hang out sometime. Where should we go? How about karaoke? You've got such a pretty voice. And you're a really good singer."

"Henmi. Do you mind? I'm busy right now."

"Huh? You're busy?" Yuka tilted her head, and her braided pigtails bounced.

Following Yuka's gaze, Sanae remembered that she was in her lounge clothing. The word "busy" wasn't all that convincing when

she was dressed like this. Exactly what sort of business could she be occupied with when she was wearing a hoodie with a pocket on the stomach?

"Oh, wait…were you about to go have tea at this café?"

Once again, Sanae followed Yuka's gaze. She noticed the glass door her hand had touched that moment was that of a restaurant… or rather, it felt more accurate to call it a café.

"Y-yeah, that's it," Sanae stuttered. "I was just thinking I'd have some tea. Anyway, I'll be seeing you—"

"Let's have tea together, then! I'm thirsty, too."

"Um, wait…"

Yuka pushed her from behind, and then they were welcomed by the sound of a fat bell ringing as they stepped into the café. There was not a single customer inside. The owner, who was polishing drinking glasses at the counter, greeted them with a listless "Welcome" without even looking over at them.

"I wonder what I should get. Maybe I'll have the deluxe parfait." Yuka pulled her glasses out from their case and examined the menu with interest.

Sanae stared outside. The twins/dog ears/white swimsuit quartet were still standing outside the building, talking.

"Mokuou? What are you looking at?"

"Oh, no! Nothing! I'm not looking at anything!"

"What's wrong? You're suddenly yelling so loud."

"Uh, well…you know, it's been a long time since I've spoken with another person, since I quit the company…"

"Ahh, I've heard that. They say that it can lead to having trouble adjusting the tone of your voice." Though Sanae had succeeded in turning Yuka's attention away from the outside, Yuka was giving her this awful pitying expression.

Sanae clenched her fists underneath the table. Why did she have to suffer the humiliation of her pity? It was all the fault of her incompetent subordinates.

"Okay, I've made up my mind," said Yuka. "I'll have the deluxe parfait after all."

"I'll take the blend coffee."

The owner repeated their orders in a dismal-sounding voice and then plodded into the kitchen. Whether this place was empty because the owner was so miserable, or the owner was feeling down because there were no customers coming, or it was simply an issue

of the time of day—whatever it was, the environment here didn't make Sanae want to stay long. And right now, there was a more pressing reason than shop atmosphere that made her want to leave.

"It really was sudden, huh. You quitting," said Yuka.

"It was." Sanae gave a quick, casual glance outside, making sure nobody would notice her look, and when she caught sight of the two angels flapping their wings and hovering in the air, she slammed her face into the table.

"What's wrong, Mokuou?!"

"Oh, no! It's nothing!"

"It can't be nothing, if you're hurting yourself like that!"

"Don't worry about it. I just kind of slipped."

"Does that happen from a minor slip?"

"It does if you have bad timing and bad luck."

"Ohh, really…? That's scary."

Just what the heck were those idiots getting up to? Without Ruler, who was law and ethics both, Team Ruler was an unruly mob incapable of maintaining discipline. Though Ruler had always felt this was true, right now it was being made quite plain to her once again. Ruler had to force these useless magical girls into a semblance of order. And as quickly as possible.

To that end, first she had to shake off Yuka. With Yuka looking, she couldn't transform or pull out her magical phone, or use it to contact the four idiots.

"Uh, I'm gonna go to the bathroom…" Sanae was about to stand, but then, when she looked at the front of the building opposite, the two angels were carrying Tama from either side and trying to fly, and she slammed her fist down on the table.

"Wh-what's wrong?"

"Sorry, it's nothing."

"Huh? Didn't you say you were going to the bathroom?"

"Uhh… Um, it's just, that doll hanging in front of the bathroom —I thought it was sort of cute."

"The one that looks like a cursed voodoo doll? Cute? Is that cute?"

This was bad. Leaving to go to the bathroom was bad. Right now, it seemed no one was asking questions about those angels in the sky, but if Sanae left her chair, odds were high that Yuka would look outside the café, and it would turn into a big scene.

Sanae had to settle herself right here and deal with the

situation. Sipping at the mediocre blend coffee the café owner had brought over, she made a noncommittal noise in response to Yuka's remark.

"Hmm…," said Yuka, "I think this parfait is a bit of a letdown."

"Oh?"

"I think the coffee jelly layer and the cornflakes layer are a little large. In the photo on the menu, the best layers, with ice cream and whipped cream and fruit, were bigger, but this is like two-thirds coffee jelly and cornflakes."

"Isn't that fine, as its own thing?"

"You don't get it. I can tell you don't get it. I can't be satisfied with this. Okay, I've made up my mind. Pardon me! Add a triple berry pancake to my order, please."

Sanae just about made a sound like a crushed frog. She was going to eat more than this? She was going to stay longer than this? Sanae wanted to wrap this up quickly and leave—how much did Yuka have to eat to satisfy herself? An adult woman eating all these sweets in the evening—wasn't she worried about gaining weight?

"You were really good at cooking, too, huh, Mokuou?"

"Have you ever even seen me cook?"

"That one time we all went to that *yakiniku* place for the year-end party, you could accurately pinpoint when to cook the meat, right? And you were giving out such snappy instructions, I kind of had this sense of trust, like, *If I stick with her, I'll get to eat all the good meat.*"

"Does that count as cooking?"

"*Yakiniku is* cooking! I got to eat some delicious meat because I was sitting with you, but over at the department head's table, it was a disaster. The meat was all burnt up. And the others with him couldn't complain, either, so they had no choice but to eat the burnt meat like it was good, and I felt bad, watching them. It was more like unpaid overtime than a year-end party for them. And speaking of overtime, I had overtime again today, but seeing me walking around at this hour, I suppose you could figure that out. It's gotten super-busy since you left, but, well, there's no point in me whining to you about it."

Eating, talking, eating, talking, eating, talking, eating, talking. Yuka's mouth just kept moving on and on. Whether she was eating or talking, it was fine as long as she was absorbed in it. Sanae had to get this over with fast so she could go chew out some idiots.

“I can’t fill the hole you left, anyway. There’s no way I could. The department head was sort of lamenting it, too, saying that the company’s lost the kind of worker you don’t get every day.”

Sanae had figured she’d just let her talk, but she was a bit curious about this topic. “…Really?”

“Really! Whenever he has the chance, he says he regrets your leaving.”

It wasn’t all that bad for the boss to regret a talented employee quitting because of their cold treatment. “Hmm…”

“You know, like there was that talent you showed off at the cherry blossom viewing party, right?”

“Hmm? Oh, did something like that happen?”

“You and me got partnered up, and we were told to give a little talent show. I was almost in tears, thinking, *What do I do, what do I do?* But you actually had something ready. I was so shocked, honestly, seeing you just bang out so many incredible impersonations.”

“Ahh, yeah, I guess I did do that. So what about it?”

“It was so amazing, you know, you came up with so many, but you made them quality, coming up with something funny for every single one. I burst out laughing as I was helping you change costumes. And then others who’d come for the blossoms started gathering, and people thought you were a professional entertainer and were laughing out loud as they tossed us money. The section chief said no one else has that kind of talent, that we’d lost a valuable worker.”

It had been a waste of time to ask seriously. Sanae leaned her face on her hand, turned to the window, and scowled. The girl in the white swimsuit was handing out snack packages to the twin angels and dog-eared girl—

“Looking at something, Mokuou?”

“Nope! Nothing!”

“You keep shouting all of a sudden.”

“Like I said, I have trouble adjusting my volume.”

“Is that what it is?”

“That’s exactly what it is.”

“Doesn’t all that yelling make your throat hurt?”

“Yes, quite a bit.”

Sanae moistened her throat with her long since cooled coffee, and when she glanced outside, the magical girls had laid down a

picnic blanket and were sitting in a circle on top of it and eating snacks.

"Gerf, gagh, koffkoffkoff—"

"H-hey, Mokuou! Hang in there! Here, have some water!"

"Ahh, thanks…*koff*."

What were they doing? Where had they come from, where were they trying to go? How the hell did you wind up having snack time out on the street, exposing yourselves to regular people? As Sanae drank the water, she coughed a few more times, and Yuka circled over to come beside her, rubbing her back and wiping up the coffee Sanae had spewed on the table with a paper napkin.

"Are you feeling sick?" Yuka asked.

"Yeah… I might be coming down with something."

"Should I call an ambulance?"

"No, it's nothing that dramatic; it's okay."

"All right, then… Mokuou, just let me know if it gets to be too much."

"I told you, I'm fine."

"You know, you've helped me with so many things at work, I feel like I owe you. So I hope I could repay you, even a little. You can rely on me."

If you want to pay me back so badly, then finish those pancakes already, Sanae thought, but she couldn't say that out loud.

"You handled regular work so quickly, and you helped me that time with your hidden talent, and when we made the pop-up signs for the counter, you drew the illustrations, right? They were professional level."

"A professional's would've been better."

"Not at all. You just dashed them off so quick, but they were so good. I can't do anything like that…not with work, or entertaining guests, or illustration. And then there was that time at the company bowling tournament when you hit nearly two hundred all by yourself, and they said the girls' team didn't even need a handicap, and then, and at the sports event, you got first in every event you participated in, and in the bread-eating competition, you set a record."

"I think the office had too many recreational events."

"The manager liked them… But anyway, Mokuou, there was this rumor about you—that you were this wild and super-elite employee from Tokyo who had punched her boss and got

transferred over here as punishment."

"I didn't punch him, though."

"And then when you actually arrived, you were even more amazing than the rumors said."

Put another way, there had been no opportunities for her to show off her abilities other than recreational events. Remembering the times before she'd become a magical girl, they were all so depressing, and nothing about them had been enjoyable. No matter how Yuka talked about it like it had been fun, the memories had no luster to Sanae.

Only somewhat paying attention to Yuka, Sanae thought back on her time at the company and breathed a little sigh. If not for having been saved by being a magical girl, she would have just rotted away. Or no—maybe she would have wound up brined in her own saltiness, not even able to rot, being a mildly popular employee at a rural office who only got to shine during recreational events—Sanae sipped at the remainder of her coffee and glanced outside. The twin angels were trying to grab at each other, while Tama and Swim Swim held their arms behind their backs to stop them.

"Those dumb…" Sanae suddenly stood.

Yuka looked at her with confusion. "What is it, Mokuou?"

"Uh, those…dumb…uhh, dumbfounding pains in my stomach… Yeah, it really hurts."

"Huh? Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'll be fine once I go home and warm up my stomach… I think…I think it'll be okay. Uh, sorry. I'll leave the money for the coffee here. I need to leave now."

"Oh, hold on a second. Tell me your number."

"Ah, um, sorry, I don't have my phone on me right now."

"Then I'll jot down my number on a napkin for you."

"No, you don't have to—"

"Hold on, it'll just take a second. Please?"

When Yuka was begging with those teary eyes, it was hard to abandon her.

But if Ruler didn't contact her team right away and stop the angels, this was sure to head for disaster. As far as Ruler knew, the two of them had never had a single fight, so then why today, of all days, here, of all places, were they starting a fight and grabbing at each other?

Sanae glanced outside to check. The twin angels were grappling, beating their wings as they spiraled upward until they disappeared from sight. Tama looked up in a daze, while Swim Swim gave a big yawn.

This was already out of control, wasn't it? Sanae wanted to cry, but she couldn't. In order to take care of that problem, first she would resolve this one. Looking over at Yuka to see if she was done writing down her number, she saw Yuka was also staring out the window. Sanae was hit with the feeling of *Ahh, it's over*, as if the ground were crumbling under her feet, and she sank down onto the sofa.

Yuka nodded a few times. "That *Magical Girl Raising Project* thing—I hear it's really popular right now."

"Oh…yeah."

"Cosplay these days is amazing, huh?"

"Yeah, cosplay is… Huh?"

"Hey, check this out." Yuka drew out of her bag the same thing the high school girl earlier had been holding: the thin local magazine. "A Smash Hit! What Is *Magical Girl Raising Project*?" decorated the cover in a dramatic font, and, flipping through, Sanae saw the pages featured black-and-white screen caps of the game along with subheadings in bold like, "Girls in cosplay appearing all over N City," and "Experts worry that it may become a societal problem," and "Urgent interview with Miss A, hospitalized after falling into a ditch while playing the cell phone game."

The twin angels descended until they were skimming along the ground and, tangled together, rose up once more.

"They call them drones, right? I like that sort of thing. I want one, too," Yuka gushed enviously. The passersby pointed their phones at the fighting twins, then continued on past them as if it were nothing. They didn't even stop.

Sanae blinked a few times, then sank deep into the sofa. "Henmi."

"What?"

"The people in this town are crazy."

"Oh? You think? I've never really felt that way, myself."

This is a new story written for this book.

The Prince of the Club

This story is set before Sister Nana and Weiss Winterprison become magical girls.

Anime

SPOILER-O-METER

Read this after watching **episode five** of the anime, pon!

The Prince of the Club

With one look at Shizuku Ashu, Nana Habutae knew instinctively that she couldn't be friends with her.

Nana had known of her before. Shizuku Ashu was one of the handful of famous people at school. It would be fair to say there wasn't even a single student or staff member who didn't know about her. People whispered plausible-sounding rumors that some people would even come around just to get a look at her, even if they didn't have any business with her.

Nana had spent a peaceful, uneventful year being uninterested in the cool, gorgeous Shizuku, good at any sport, the brains and the beauty, all famous or whatever. And then, in the spring of her second year, seeing Shizuku for the first time in an applied math seminar, Nana decided she would avoid associating with her as much as possible.

To Nana, the most straightforward indicator of beauty was other people's reactions. The greater their reaction, the larger the absolute value of your beauty—so Nana believed. In that regard, there was nobody as beautiful as Shizuku. People crowded around her, no matter what she did. Guys flocked to hit on her, girls flocked to sigh over her, and she was unperturbed about it all, as if she took it for granted. You could say that was exactly why Nana didn't like her.

Shizuku's air of nobility, her masculine style, and her handsome features had earned her the laughable nickname of "the Prince." To Nana, princes did not exist in real life. Only in fiction would princes kindly embrace her.

Nana had gone through her first year without any sort of contact with Shizuku, and even when they wound up in the same seminar, it wasn't like they had to hang out and be friends. Worst case, Nana could change classes. She wasn't so attached to numerical analysis or functions—her motive for registering had

been a careless one, an invitation from a friend. Shizuku probably wasn't even aware Nana existed in the first place. To someone who was used to being fawned over, a person who never so much as looked at her might as well not exist. That was fine. Nonintervention was best. Nana wouldn't deny the appeal of being fawned over. She certainly liked feeling fawned over, too. She simply didn't like Shizuku as a person.

So Nana had absolutely no intention of getting involved with her—but at random moments Shizuku would catch her eye. As the elderly professor explained what sort of things they'd be doing in the class, Nana looked over at the wall clock to check the time. When she turned her gaze back to the whiteboard, on the way her eyes met Shizuku's. Nana reflexively smiled and bowed her head, then immediately averted her gaze, but she got a nasty premonition that was difficult to express in words. The nastier these sorts of premonitions were, the more accurate they tended to be.

It was three in the afternoon. The school day was over. Parting ways with her friends, Nana headed to the club building. The room for the ski club, of which she was a member, was deep within the building, the third room and the dingiest of a series of old, dirty, moldy prefab huts. On the walls was scrawled some crude graffiti from students of years past, and the atmosphere here, like a slum or the bad end of town, would make even a tough young guy hesitate to step inside.

But that was just how it felt. In actuality, a girl wasn't going to get attacked here. At the very least, it had never happened to Nana. The important thing here was the atmosphere that made it difficult for girls to come, and if you could overcome it, there was something to be gained.

"Hi, everyone."

"Hey, Nana."

"Been a while!"

"Sup."

"Wow, this is unusual," said Nana. "I haven't seen your face in quite some time, Kitajima."

"And it's just as handsome each time, right?"

"Hey, we're playing this German board game right now. You wanna join in, Nana?"

"Ohh, looks fun," she agreed.

“Come on, come on.”

There were five members, all guys, packed into the small club room. Once they saw that Nana had arrived, they all stood at once, and one of them pulled out an empty chair. Nana gave a small nod and took a seat. It was wonderful VIP treatment. This was precisely why Nana came to this club.

The ski club was supposed to be a sports club. That was why, instead of being in the reinforced concrete arts club building, it was in a room of the athletic club section, which contained lines of prefab huts. But what they actually did was far from an athletic club’s activities. Aside from their annual ski camp, they didn’t even touch a pair of skis. They just talked a lot and played games and mahjong with the pretext that they were “making plans for a ski trip” to keep the higher-ups from getting angry or telling them off. Despite being a club for a sport that involved going outside, it had become a contradictory indoor thing.

And so since the club itself was worthless and its location meant it had a headwind blowing against it, there were no female members aside from Nana. When Nana’s friends had asked her about her club, she’d just smiled and given a vague answer. Seeing her response, her friends had not pressed further, and the subject had shifted to something else. It was best if they didn’t get any other female members.

“There’s a new flavor of Chips Bar. Want one?”

“Ohh, tea, yeah. You okay with the usual?”

“Put in two ice cubes for her!”

So there would be no more female members. In other words, there was Nana and Nana alone. And the only people who would join a club like this would be boring, unattractive guys. There was only one girl among a group of dingy guys of the type who would have hardly ever spoken with a girl, even if you went all the way back to preschool. So then of course they’d fawn over her. And the attention made Nana happy. It wasn’t like she was ordering them to do this—the other members elevated her of their own accord. They were doing it because they wanted to. Both parties were getting something out of this. It was fair to call it a reciprocal relationship. At the very least, nobody here was losing anything.

No matter what sort of unpleasant things happened, whenever she came here, her heart was cleansed. There were no princes, but princes didn’t exist in reality in the first place.

Their game ended, and Nana joined in, taking the loser's place. "Please go easy on me."

"Don't worry, Uemura is the only one playing seriously."

"Hey, hey, hey, why are you bringing up my name, here?"

"Who cares who's playing serious; let's just roll to decide turn order—"

The sound of a knock rang through the small room. The guys looked at each other and then at Nana, and with a tilt of her head, Nana told them, *"I don't know anything about this."* No one but Nana would knock before entering the club room. In other words, it was someone not from the club. It wasn't like this group was getting up to anything blatantly forbidden, but you couldn't really say they were earnestly engaging in club activity, either.

Without waiting for the signal from the club captain, everyone but Nana went into action, clearing the game and dice off the table to toss them over to the stack of miscellaneous personal items piled up in a corner of the club room, then putting a blanket on top of that. They flipped over the whiteboard so the side that had some stuff written on it about *ski camp plans* was facing outward. Then, once they'd made sure everyone was seated again, the club captain prompted the visitor, "Come in."

"Pardon me."

The door opened, and a beam of light shone in. Nana squinted at the brightness. The light was so strong, she couldn't tell who stood there, but she'd heard that voice before. It was clear and carried well, and that was exactly why it got on her nerves. It wasn't just that she'd heard the voice before—hear that voice once, and you'd never forget it.

The door closed with a creak. Gradually the light faded. Now she could see who it was, whether she liked it or not. The guys were gazing at her with dazed expressions—no, they were entranced. One had his mouth half-open, one kept rubbing his eyes, another automatically stood up, and another muttered something under his breath.

"Sorry for coming in halfway through the term. I'm looking to join the club," Shizuku said with a charming smile. Nana felt like the ground was falling out from beneath her.

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Nana didn't like to talk about other people behind their backs, and disparaging someone to their face was even worse. She hated biting sarcasm even more, and hiding her identity to post on anonymous boards or social media about how "I met this awful person today" was out of the question. It was fine for her to think any sort of nasty thoughts in her own head. But she couldn't say such things out loud. If she said something bad about someone, that was the point when she would lose the right to be loved by the princes she adored in stories. Nana lived and died by this creed.

So she had no choice but to withstand it. The invasion of Shizuku Ashu—and yes, it was an invasion—had transformed the social relationships within her club. The beautiful structure that had placed Nana at the top with everyone serving her had crumbled. Nana had been deposed from her throne, and, after a successful coup d'etat, the reign of the new queen, Shizuku Ashu, had begun. The office chair with the elbow rests that had been Nana's special seat before had now become Shizuku's, and the guys who had been attentive to Nana in everything she did now only had eyes for Shizuku. It wasn't like they were treating her coldly—more like her presence was being forgotten. The guys would look at Shizuku like they were spellbound, and only afterward would they shift their gazes over to Nana to say with their eyes, *"Oh yeah, was she here, too?"* It was true that the eyes spoke more than the mouth. Precisely because they never put it into words, you knew they never lied.

Ironically, the one who was kindest to Nana was Shizuku. When Nana came, Shizuku would pull out a chair for her, saying, "Here," and offer her the snacks she liked. But this was not true kindness. It was nothing more than an expression of her security around someone who had fallen to a lower rank. Nana privately smothered her humiliation and anger, accepting the snacks with a smile, crunching them in her mouth. No matter how sweet the taste, this was still a bitter hardship to endure.

Is this woman that much better than me?

Nana didn't let such thoughts leave her mouth, instead

swallowing them together with the snacks.

The games started to revolve around Shizuku, and the rules changed to put her at an advantage. One guy brought in a mountain of manga he said he wanted Shizuku to read; one brought in some video games he wanted her to play; another gave her a tablet, saying it would be convenient for her to have. The onslaught of presents escalated further and further and couldn't be stopped. Nothing of this sort had happened even once before with Nana.

When Shizuku offered to walk her to the train station, Nana refused her with the brightest of smiles, then returned to the apartment building where she lived and stood in front of the mirror.

Appearance-wise, Nana didn't even want to consider comparing herself with Shizuku. But it wasn't as if Nana was ugly. She was on the pretty side, in fact. Shizuku was just abnormally good-looking.

In fact, Nana was actually superior in terms of girlishness and cuteness. She had never seen Shizuku wearing a skirt. Her various rather fashionable items of clothing, such as her thin leather suspenders, her coat, worn with a silver chain instead of a belt, and her boots with lots of straps, were more masculine than feminine, and her makeup wasn't only natural in style—she applied little in general. As the nickname of "the Prince" implied, she gave off a strongly androgynous impression.

Though Nana hadn't been putting much effort into her makeup at all lately, either. Her fake eyelashes were drying up in the back of her makeup drawer. From now on she would avoid overly thick makeup and apply it in as natural a way as possible, but she had one more concern that loomed larger. It was something she hadn't wanted to think about, if she could avoid it.

In front of the mirror, Nana spun around—once to the right and once to the left. Her strawberry-speckled skirt fluttered up, but Nana turned heavily. Her legs did not move smoothly.

The cause was clear. Three months had passed since she'd begun avoiding standing on the scale. For better or for worse, she had gained weight. Although she was part of a sports club, they hardly moved around at all, much less got actual exercise; they did nothing but chat. She nibbled snacks and drank juice, and at the parties they had every week or two, she drank and ate a lot. Not that she'd shamefully conspired to eat and drink lots because it was on someone else's dime. The refreshments were just tasty. Chicken *karaage*, fries, deep-fried squid rings, roasted potatoes with butter—

the common *izakaya* menu was so good, and along with some beer, she could eat it forever.

And she didn't exercise. Plus, as someone who gained weight easily, of course this would make her gain weight. Nana had put herself through the wringer before—studying for entrance exams while simultaneously dieting, with the goal of losing thirty pounds before starting university—and the result had been that she'd become wonderfully slim and had started school as a new woman. But that had been a long time ago. If she gained any more weight, she'd go over the level she'd been at before starting university.

Nana made up her mind. She was going on a diet. You could say this time would be easier, since it wasn't coming in a set with entrance exams. So it was doable. She could pull it off. Nana's oasis was for Nana alone. She couldn't let some newcomer mess it up. She would diet, lose weight, and regain her former glory, and once again, Nana would reign as the queen.

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One month after deciding to go on a diet, Nana looked at the display on the scale and sighed. This past month, though there had been little rises and dips, overall her weight had been stable, and nothing had changed. She hadn't gained, but she hadn't lost any, either. She was using the treadmill she'd bought online for thirty minutes every morning and night. She'd stopped having the rare blueberry cheesecake from the cake shop Lalalanti, restraining herself by biting on a wrung handkerchief. She'd stopped drinking juice and went with tea. She didn't use the elevator, taking the stairs instead. Any distance of about one station, she walked. All these various efforts had brought her no results. She was just denying herself while maintaining the current situation.

The club was still under Shizuku's dominion, and with her weight unchanged, Nana could do nothing. Even when she didn't come for a bit, and then came back to the club, they didn't greet her with "Long time no see" or "You haven't come by lately, what happened?" She merely got a normal "Hello" or "Welcome" or "Hey." They didn't even notice her absence, did they?

She stepped off the scale, and the display went blank. She didn't want to see that display, so she sighed with relief when it was gone,

and then she got down on herself for feeling relieved and sighed again, putting on her underwear and pajamas, then sitting down in the rattan chair by the window. The stars were sparkling in the sky. Surely the star who sparkled strongest was Shizuku. But Nana wanted to be the brightest star in her club, at least.

Still looking up at the night sky, Nana thought back on herself over this past month. Just where had she gone wrong? Why hadn't she managed to lose weight? She hadn't turned down the parties, but that was because she didn't want to wind up forgotten. So then she had no choice but to go along with these mandatory events, partaking only a little—no, she got the feeling that the problem wasn't a few snacks here or there. Things that Nana liked, like *karaage* and fries, would show up, even though she hadn't ordered them, and they'd be placed in front of her, too, so she'd eat them without thinking. This had happened not just once, but two or three times already.

Hmm?

Something like a flash of insight crossed her mind.

It wasn't just the *karaage* and fries at the drinking parties. It was something that happened normally in the club room. The new Chips Bar flavors would be offered to her, and she would pick them up thoughtlessly. But nobody there liked Chips Bars except for Nana. The club members all had different tastes—one of the guys liked chocolates, another liked cookies, another liked salted *senbei*, another liked brown sugar syrup *karinto*—so everyone would bring their own favorites. Everyone knew that Nana liked Mutoh Co.'s Chips Bar series, and before Shizuku had come, they had competed to get it for her. But currently Nana's charisma had been lost, and nobody would bother to get her favorites. So then why were there Chips Bars? And every day, too.

Nana touched her finger to her chin and leaned forward.

It was odd. Something was there that shouldn't be. Even at drinking parties, all the things Nana liked kept showing up in front of her… Who had been present then? Nana got to her feet and took one of the high-quality ice cream cups from the freezer and opened the seal. She needed to give her brain some sugar to search her memories.

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A few days later, at the club, one thing differed from the usual. When Shizuku offered to walk her home, Nana agreed. Leaving behind the guys, who seemed sad to see them go, the two of them headed to the station. On the way, the gazes of both men and women gathered on Shizuku. Shizuku paid no mind at all to their looks of surprise or envy. Not even their warm expressions got her attention. She walked boldly on. Nana was the only one minding the eyes of others, but nobody was staring at her. They all only had eyes for Shizuku.

"Are you okay?" Nana must have seemed melancholy, as Shizuku, walking beside her, put out her hand with a worried expression.

But Nana shook her head, raising a palm at her.

Before long, they were at the station, and after waiting about five minutes, they got on the second car of the three-car train.

Sitting by Shizuku's side with one fist's worth of distance between them, Nana sighed. "Ashu."

"What?" Shizuku looked at Nana with surprise.

As far as Nana could remember, she'd never been the one to address Shizuku, up until now. Because there had been no reason to. Now it was different. Nana continued. "Do you like Chips Bars?"

"No…I'm not much into snacks." Shizuku's expression turned glum. Even frowning, she was pretty.

Nana cleared her throat to keep her irritation from showing on her face and continued. "I've heard you're the one who's been bringing the Chips Bars to the club room."

"Yeah, um…"

"You would buy something you don't like?"

"Well, I…" Embarrassed, Shizuku glanced down. That was basically an acknowledgment.

Nana decided to take things a step further. "Were you buying them for me?"

"Ah…yes, I was. Since I heard you like them."

"And during parties, you ordered fried chicken and squid rings."

"Yeah, I did."

"But you don't eat them yourself."

"I don't really like greasy food."

"So those were also for me to eat?"

"Mm-hmm…" Shizuku crossed her ridiculously long legs the

other way, putting both hands to her forehead as she dropped her head and closed her eyes. Her cheeks were slightly reddened. It seemed she was normal enough to be ashamed at the exposure of her evil deeds.

But just because she felt ashamed was no reason to forgive her.

"Why were you trying to get me to eat them?" Nana asked, despite knowing the reason already. Shizuku's sabotage had caused Nana's diet to fail. She'd been unable to lose weight and had not managed to regain her position within the club.

Shizuku began to speak in little fragments, as if it were difficult to say. "You've just…you've seemed down lately, Habutae."

That's your fault, Nana thought, but she wouldn't say that.

"You've been eating less, too."

So then Shizuku had been observing her. No surprise there. Many times, Nana would look up only to meet Shizuku's gaze and reflexively smile. From Shizuku's perspective, someone like Nana had to be worthless and nothing else, so then why was there a need to observe her this much to drive her down?

"So then you tempted me to eat a lot," Nana said.

"I thought if it was something you liked, maybe you'd eat it. I just felt like if you didn't eat something, you wouldn't cheer up."

Nana could hear the unpleasant sound of her teeth grinding together inside her mouth. This was not an appropriate display of shame for the exposure of her wicked deeds. Even now that her deeds had been outed, she was still making excuses for herself. There was no way she could honestly think such a poor justification would pass. She was most certainly thinking that she had to commit to the excuse, as a front; she had to have a reason to keep from getting blamed or insulted. She just didn't want to be cast as the bad guy.

Nana stole a glance at Shizuku's face. It was tilted down, her expression a bit serious, eyes closed. It seemed like the redness that colored her cheeks had deepened. This wasn't reddening from shame. She was excited by the joy of toying with Nana. There was no mistaking it.

The train car rattled, and Nana's bottom bounced up half an inch, then fell right away. Feeling her flesh jiggle doubled her frustration and irritation, and, still smiling, Nana clenched her teeth.

Shizuku was acknowledging the truth, but not her wrongdoings.

But Nana had already anticipated this somewhat. Shizuku didn't at all look like the type who would apologize and say she was at fault.

If Shizuku wasn't going to apologize, then that was fine. Plan A was not the only tactic Nana had. There was also plan B.

The key here was Shizuku's motive—her motive in joining the club, and also her motive in trying to tear Nana down. There had to be a reason that Shizuku, who already led a fulfilling life, would come all the way down to this haunt for losers in the club building. She would also need a reason to want to suppress Nana, and Nana had made some inferences about the reason for that.

"Ashu."

"Yeah?" Shizuku lifted her head and looked at Nana, who smiled brightly.

"You're interested in someone in the club, aren't you?"

Yes, it was love. If there was someone in the club Shizuku liked, it would all make sense. Seeing her crush fawning over Nana along with the rest of the group, Shizuku would have felt uneasy. If her goal was to beat down Nana, her rival in love, and date the object of her affections to win herself a happily-ever-after, then Nana was fully willing to cooperate, as much as it took. Nana would be lying if she said she had no reserves about helping out someone who had made her suffer such a miserable fate, but nevertheless, if it would bring back her old peaceful days, then it was for the best.

No matter which of the guys in the club Shizuku were to date, Nana didn't care. To her, they were ultimately only for fawning over her, and she held personal affection for none of them. They were not at all her type. She didn't know whom Shizuku liked, but she thought Shizuku was a pretty good catch. There had to be tons of men in her life who were attractive and had brighter futures, but perhaps it was just as the saying went, and there was no accounting for taste.

Nana turned to Shizuku, who turned to Nana, then got flustered and looked away, turning toward the seat in front of her. Shizuku's eyes focused on nothing, her hands tightly clenched in her lap. Her cheeks were quite red. There was no mistaking it—Shizuku was anxious because Nana had hit the nail on the head.

Pausing for a few breaths, Shizuku spoke softly. "Interested, um…well."

"Well?"

"Do you remember the applied math seminar?"

Nana didn't let her internal surprise show on the surface. Their eyes had met, but she had thought she'd been the only one aware of that. It couldn't be—Shizuku was saying she remembered that moment?

"Oh, yes," said Nana.

"Our eyes met, right? Then you smiled and I…felt…happy…"

Nana was shocked. Shizuku said something more, but Nana didn't even hear it. Nana had thought that it was only wild animals or people of the criminal stripe who took eye contact as a challenge. Shizuku was saying that since their eyes had met that time, she had decided to beat Nana down.

No—it wasn't simply that their eyes had met. Nana remembered her initial impression then, that the two of them would not be able to be friends. If Shizuku had felt the same thing, then wouldn't that mean she'd believed she was being glared at, scowled at, and sneered at, too, by someone she really hated?

Now Nana could finally actually understand what the redness tingeing Shizuku's cheeks meant. That was anger. She was worked into such a fury, it had caused her to go red.

Nana panicked. If Shizuku's goal was hostility, to bring Nana down, then there was no plan A or plan B. Nana would be driven out from her heart's oasis, and, depending on Shizuku's whim, there might be even more to come. Just the thought that Shizuku might come over to steal Nana's place, no matter where she went, made her cringe in on herself. Shizuku Ashu was capable enough to be able to pull that much off easily, and she had the cruelty and callousness needed to do it without hesitation, too.

"So, here…" Before she knew it, Shizuku was handing her something. It was a little scrap of paper. Turning it over, Nana was shocked. In venomous-looking colors, in a hair-raising font like blood clots, was written SISTER OF THE DEAD, and depicted there was a hellscape of rotten bodies flailing around a nun who was crying and wailing and trying to escape. Nana just about dropped it on reflex, and steadied the hand that held the paper with her other hand.

"Um…," said Shizuku, "I wasn't sure about suddenly going for a zombie movie, but I hear it's been well received by regular viewers who weren't fans of zombies."

"Ah…oh, a movie ticket."

The train announcement told the name of the next station. It was Nana's stop. She scolded her mush-feeling knees and stood. And

more importantly than her home being close, she just didn't want to be here.

"Um, I have to get off soon, so," said Nana.

"I'll walk you home."

She shivered. What did Shizuku intend to do, knowing where she lived? Did she mean to say that she wouldn't leave Nana alone, not only at school, but even in her own home, her place of rest?

"No, it's fine. I'll be all right." Repeating, "I'll be all right," Nana held Shizuku back and somehow got off the train.

Shizuku called out behind her, "Then at ten this Sunday. In front of the girl statue at the station."

Huh?

Nana turned around to see Shizuku waving. In her hand was clasped the same thing Nana held—a tasteless zombie movie ticket—and Nana understood what Shizuku was saying. The train rattled as it left, and then the noise and swaying were gone, and in its wake Nana was left there alone, slumped to the ground.

Nana prayed to God. *Why must I be tortured this badly, simply because our eyes met? Is something so unfair allowed? Whatever will become of me, being forced to watch such a grotesque and creepy movie? If you have even the slightest mercy, then please, save me!*

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There was no God, but that which was not divine reached out to her with the hand of salvation.

"And so now you'll be working as a magical girl, pon."

Nana looked at the palm of her hand, then turned it around to look at the back. Her skin felt smooth like porcelain, and soft—and these were not her short, round fingers. They were long and elegant, like Shizuku's.

She stood up, walked around. Though that was all she was doing, she could tell her body moved lighter, quicker, more like she wanted it to. Not only could she walk like a model—she could do a somersault in the air, too.

She stood in front of the mirror. A sigh of "Ahh" slipped out of her. This was not the Nana Habutae who would stress eat snacks in her pajamas and guzzle down beer. There stood a beautiful nun, just like Sister Nana, her avatar in the game, made real. When she

combed her fingers through her hair, the strands slid between her fingers like silk threads. She did it over and over, but the beautiful curls maintained their shape and didn't fall apart.

Her thighs were boldly exposed, and her chest was front and center like she was showing it off. She was voluptuous, but not at all fat. It was a balanced physique. Wonderful. This was what she had wanted.

"Hey, hey, are you listening, pon?"

"Of course…I'm listening, Fav." Even her voice was different. It was bright and clear.

She picked up the jar of face cream from her dresser. She shook it, but it was empty. Holding the jar in her right hand, Sister Nana squeezed it just slightly. The thick glass jar shattered, making a mess on top of the dresser. Slowly opening her palm, she found it still beautifully smooth, with not a single scratch.

The place where she belonged was something she had to protect, something she had to win. Being a magical girl was a means to that end. No matter what foul methods Shizuku might use, with the power of a magical girl—with the power of Sister Nana—she could strike back.

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The long-awaited Sunday came. Today was the day she would put an end to her grievances with her mortal enemy, Shizuku Ashu. Nana ate breakfast and dessert, the smooth, soft, and thick cream pudding she'd gotten for herself the day before, to get herself pumped up. She was full of energy, not anxiety. She just had to act naturally and not give in to any of the pressure. She transformed into the magical girl Sister Nana, put a coat on over her fancy costume, and stepped out.

The statue where they were meeting was two stations away, but if she left an hour before, she could make it by walking leisurely. Sister Nana wanted to walk. After one whole step out of her apartment, she felt eyes on her. An elementary school kid out riding a bike with friends stopped, and a middle-aged jogger running with their dog on a leash ahead of them got dragged along by the dog. Sister Nana couldn't help but remember the other day, when she'd been walking beside Shizuku. Today, Nana was the star of the

show. Basking in the attention, she took her time on her way to the station, enjoying herself, and arrived in front of the statue of the girl. Shizuku was already waiting there, reading a paperback with a leather book cover in one hand. The image of her reading was picture perfect—but today, Nana was just as perfect.

Sister Nana had an idea. She would say she was a friend of Nana's and apologize, and tell Shizuku that Nana couldn't come because something had come up at the last minute. And then she would intimidate her. She would shove her magical-girl beauty in Shizuku's face—you could call this an otherworldly beauty a human could never have—and teach her a lesson: *There are people in the world above even the best, Shizuku Ashu.*

As a magical girl, she could win. As a magical girl, she could do this. She wouldn't have to feel frustrated anymore. She wouldn't have anything stolen from her.

Keeping a cool attitude, Sister Nana slowly raised her right hand. "Good morning."

Shizuku looked up, and she started to smile that charming smile of hers, but then a shadow immediately fell over her face. "Who are you?"

"I'm a friend of Nana Habutae's."

Just as planned, Sister Nana told her that Nana couldn't be there because something had come up, and that she was very sorry. With her ample chest boldly puffed out, Sister Nana apologized without reservation and bowed her head. She felt like she was no lesser than Shizuku, that she was even better, in fact, and having the inferiority complex that had clung to her all this time melt away felt so good. She brought all these feelings together to turn on Shizuku.

The more Sister Nana spoke, the more the gloom in Shizuku's face grew and deepened, and by the time Nana was done, her expression had turned halfway to hostile. This was not the usual Shizuku. This got Sister Nana's heart racing, but, confident that this wouldn't bring about her loss, she chose to look back boldly.

Shizuku thrust her hands into her coat pockets, burying everything below the nose in her scarf. This rough, or rather brusque, gesture was a rare sight from her, and though she didn't make any accusations, it made Sister Nana's heart pound.

"Then let's go." And just like that, Shizuku turned around and started walking. Sister Nana hurried after her.

What did she mean by “Let’s go?” Where was she saying they would go?

“Ah, um—”

“You’re coming with me to the movie instead of Habutae, right?”

Sister Nana had said nothing of the sort. But Shizuku strode off briskly with the most unapproachable attitude. She had long legs, so she moved quickly. Scurrying after her, Sister Nana thought, *Is she not scared by Sister Nana’s beauty?*

No, that wasn’t it. Maybe she wasn’t frightened by it, but she was irritated. She was confused that it wasn’t Nana Habutae, who had been nothing more than a target to bully, and was no longer concealing her aggression. It was affecting her, without a doubt. The real game began now.

They arrived at the movie theater, handed over the tickets, and went inside and took their seats. Even seated, Sister Nana was not at all calm. She wasn’t into zombie movies in the first place. What was so interesting about a movie with gushing blood and spewing guts?

Just as she’d expected, Nana blanched at all the gore in the film. She glanced over at Shizuku, but she never looked away from the screen, watching with a sour expression. If it wasn’t interesting, then she could simply not watch it, and she could’ve just not invited Nana to begin with. Nana could hardly even grasp what was going on in the story, and while she was still filled with thoughts like, *That was scary* and *I don’t really get it* and *What’s so fun about this?* the movie came to an end. The ending theme was death metal with growling vocals that made her want to plug her ears, and there was absolutely nothing good she could say about this movie, beginning to end. If this was a psychological attack from Shizuku, then it had succeeded.

To Nana’s shock, the rest of the audience seemed satisfied, saying things like, “That was fun!” or “This one part was so good” to their friends, family, and partners. Nana and Shizuku were the only two to leave the place quickly without saying anything, despite having seen the film together.

Leaving the theater, Shizuku strode over to a vending machine. “You okay with oolong tea?”

“Ah, yes.”

Shizuku bought two cans of oolong tea, one for herself and one

that she tossed over to Sister Nana, then sat down heavily in a corner of the lobby in a plastic chair set beside the vending machine.

"Go ahead," Shizuku prompted, and Nana was forced to take a seat in the chair on the opposite side of the table. She didn't open the drink, just holding it in her right hand. She felt as if the cold were coming through her hand to cool her head.

"So…," Shizuku began.

"Yes?"

"What's your relationship with Habutae?" Shizuku's expression was still dark.

Sister Nana had been hard-hit mentally by the zombie movie, but she deliberately straightened herself up. "I believe I've told you that she's a friend."

"A friend? Really? I can't believe that."

"Why not?"

"It's hard to put it in words. But I can tell. You're not family, not friends, but you have a deep, strong bond. I can feel it. It's crystal clear."

Shizuku was overwhelmingly sharp, but still, Nana couldn't acknowledge it. She remembered quite well being told that if a magical girl's identity became known, her qualifications would be stripped from her. Right now, being a magical girl was all of her hopes, the thread of her salvation. She couldn't sever it with her own hands.

"I don't know what you're talking about…," said Nana.

"You're gonna play dumb?"

"I'm not playing dumb!"

There was a soft *tap* as Shizuku laid a little case atop the table. "I meant to give this to Habutae when she came."

Sister Nana gulped. Opening the case revealed an adorable ring. "This is…for Habutae…? Why?"

"I meant to ask her to date me, officially."

"Wha?" With that sound, the oolong tea in Sister Nana's right hand exploded. Unable to withstand her grip strength, the contents spewed out as it was crushed in her palm.

"Incredible grip strength you got there," remarked Shizuku. "So you're threatening me?"

"Huh? H-hold on. I'm not trying to threaten—"

"I don't care who you are—I'm not gonna lose to you."

“Huh? Huh?”

“Remember that.” Shizuku practically kicked the chair away to stand, and Sister Nana stumbled to her feet, reaching out for Shizuku’s back as she left, but she was too far away.

Still, Nana somehow managed to call out, “Why…why?!”

“I just want her to keep smiling.” Shizuku made no move to turn around.

Sister Nana shot back with even more vehemence, “But you’re both women!”

Shizuku stopped and turned to face Sister Nana. Her expression was startlingly calm. “That’s only a trivial matter where love is concerned,” she spat, but it also sounded like an admonition, or just like a murmur. Then she turned back around, and, with the sound of her footsteps, disappeared into the crowd. Sister Nana collapsed into her chair.

Nana’s mind was swimming: *What is she talking about? What an embarrassing thing to say. I could never fall for someone like that.* But each thought disappeared like a sea of bubbles as it failed to capture her emotions in that moment. She couldn’t even try getting up from the chair. What had Shizuku just said? What was going on? She didn’t know. The words she’d heard only a moment ago were spinning around in her confused head. Sister Nana breathed out an “Ahh.”

This story first appeared in the *Monthly Magical Girl Raising Project* section of *This Manga Is Amazing! WEB*.

Conditions for an Anime Adaptation

This story is set right after all sixteen magical girls assemble in the town where the *Magical Girl Raising Project* game takes place.

Anime

SPOILER-O-METER

Read this after watching **episode six** of the anime, pon!

Conditions for an Anime Adaptation

☆ **Palette**

Palette's mornings started early. There was no need to get up so early when they were not assigned to a magical girl, but even now that they were in a new position, old habits die hard.

Palette would work late into the night, get the minimal amount of sleep, then start up again in the early morning. This wasn't simply because they had a packed schedule. This was the way they had learned from senior staff through the induction course with the Magical Girl Resources Department, before being assigned to the Public Relations Department as an in-house mascot.

Magical girls were far stronger than regular humans. For those who had attached mascots, you might say their mascots were the proof of the Magical Kingdom's favor. But magical girls weren't born that way. They were born human and grew up human, and it was thanks to a little opportunity and fortune that they became magical girls. They were always just human to begin with. No matter how much potential one had as a magical girl, if she had even the slightest bit of malice in her heart, then she could get up to disastrous incidents, or cause accidents through her carelessness.

So a mascot had to live a regulated lifestyle in order to be a model for their magical girl. If a mascot revealed slovenly behavior, it would affect their magical girl and lead to incidents and accidents down the road. If the mascot had their head firmly on their shoulders, then the magical girl would follow suit and be focused on her activities, growing into a fine magical girl who would not cause accidents or incidents. If a magical girl with abundant talent grew up properly into a great magical girl, that would not only make her happy—her talent would bring smiles to a thousand, ten thousand, a hundred thousand people, or even more.

The lessons from senior staff lived on inside Palette. It was

precisely because Palette loved magical girls and lived for them that they did not have blind faith in them. Simple unconditional trust was not real trust—it was just carelessness. The relationship between mascot and magical girl was not a lazy one of complicity. They would push each other, teach each other, and improve each other—that was the kind of relationship Palette thought of as the ideal. Palette was no longer assigned to a magical girl, but they always had to be ready so that they could be assigned to another one at any time. That was why Palette got up early.

Palette crawled out from under the vending machine into the pale glow of the morning sun. To sleep outside in this season, you needed a heat source. This machine stayed running even when nobody was around, emitting heat at all times, and was perfect for a bed.

Standing up on their hind legs, Palette arched their back to stretch. When they'd come here the night before, this playground had looked fishy under a dingy, dying streetlamp, but under the morning light, it felt nostalgic—solemn, even.

With a sniff, Palette checked for scents. Small animal-type mascots weren't as great as the popular digital fairies when it came to clerical skills, but they had the sharp senses of wild animals and excellent physical capabilities. Palette could check to make sure there were no people around with just a sniff.

Palette pulled a map out from their mini mascot-use backpack and unfurled it. At their current pace, they should arrive at their goal, N City, around that evening. You could get there in the blink of an eye if you used a magical teleportation device, and even without going that far, Palette could request a magical-girl porter and sit quietly inside a bag on public transportation. This time, though, Palette had to infiltrate N City solo. They weren't traveling incognito or going in for a surprise attack or anything as dramatic as that, but if Palette were to make a grand declaration about going into N City, it would interfere with the magical-girl exams there.

Musician of the Forest, Cranberry, was the talented magical-girl scout of the Magical Girl Resources Department, who had discovered countless numbers of first-class magical girls. Among those she had recruited was Magical Daisy, whom Palette had once worked with as a mascot.

To Palette, Magical Daisy had been the glory days. Palette wanted to work with a magical girl like that again. Even after their

anime had ended, Palette had continued to hold that desire hidden in their heart as they worked in the Public Relations Department, but Palette had never again met a magical girl as wonderful.

Ever since Palette had shifted to a more behind-the-scenes role, the Public Relations Department had stopped being about magical girls and was now about TV shows. Originally, magical girls got anime adaptations simply because they needed to be shown to the world at large, but that wasn't enough to get an anime these days. There was a rampant reversal of priorities in how anime was made: The department wanted more fancy action scenes because they were popular with viewers, so they sought out magical girls whose magic was suited to those kinds of flashy fights. Even if Palette were to offer their frank advice about it, people would only think, *They're just an old mascot nostalgic for the old days.*

What's more, ever since the economic downturn, even scouting out new magical girls for new anime had become difficult. For starters, it took way more labor to get to the point of airing a new magical-girl anime. Then, once you got popular, the series would be drawn out forever, and then just when you thought a new show was starting up for once, it would turn out to be a knockoff of a popular show that brought nothing fresh to the table. After the first *Star Queen* series had aired, just how many shows about magical girls fighting invaders from another world with over-the-top action scenes had turned up?

Palette clenched a tiny fist. In the modern world, even the fantastical, fairy-tale magical girls couldn't escape capitalism. Palette wasn't so arrogant as to believe that you could make an anime based on what you solely wanted. But hadn't there once been more variety in magical-girl anime? It used to be you could find any conceivable type of magical-girl show (for better or for worse) on TV, and all of these shows had had their fans. There were a lot of fans who said things like that on the fan site that Palette frequented, too. It couldn't be a bad thing to try making an anime people like them wanted to see.

Even the anime Palette had appeared in as a mascot character, *Magical Daisy*, had been bashed as heretical at the time. Its plot, which involved facing off against realistic criminal organizations, had even been singled out by parents' organizations. But despite that, a lot of people had loved the *Magical Daisy* anime and the girl named Magical Daisy.

The exam run by Cranberry, Musician of the Forest, had discovered Magical Daisy, so there might be a future star out there. More accurately, this future star would still be a child who had yet to become a magical girl, and this exam was like a pro baseball scout looking for budding talent at high school games.

Palette tucked away their schedule book, shouldered their backpack, and dashed off. If possible, Palette wanted to arrive by afternoon to collect information. Without even realizing it, Palette had begun humming *Hello ☆ Daisy!* the opening theme of *Magical Daisy*.

☆ Fav

Fav's mornings started late.

Magical girls were creatures of sloth and indulgence, and as such would only start their work after sunset, so there was no need for the mascot characters who accompanied them to get up early in the morning. Digital fairies didn't need sleep, but they did have a fixed recommendation for time in continuous operation. Rest was important. Lazily browsing the N City magical-girl aggregate site, trolling pure and innocent young fans on the message boards, wasting time on news sites and personal blogs that had absolutely nothing to do with magical girls, making fun of articles and readers in the comment section, Fav spent his time as he pleased in ease and leisure, for his own pleasure.

However, this was one day he couldn't spend doing as he pleased.

"Cranberry! Bad news, pon!"

"What's all this fuss?"

Something like static ran all through Fav's hologram, and there was noise in his synthetic voice, too. It was quite unusual for this digital fairy, who enjoyed observing girls kill each other from a safe distance, to lose his cool. "Fav got contacted from a friend on the outside, pon. They've told me that right now, Palette, a mascot from the PR Department, is coming here to N City, pon."

"The PR Department?" Cranberry's shapely eyebrows furrowed slightly. "Not Inspection?"

"This is from a mascot get-together that happened a few days ago, pon."

“Oho, I wasn’t aware there were such gatherings out there.”

“It’s just a boring sort of get-together where they chat about nothing much, pon. Fav’s source said that at the get-together, Palette got real worked up and went on a rant, pon.”

“Your source told you? You weren’t there, Fav?”

“What makes you think that Fav, who’s basically the representative for digital fairies, would be invited to a gathering with a bunch of useless types who complain to each other about how the digital fairy series took their jobs, pon?”

“Isn’t it because you’re the kind of character who would call them ‘useless types’ that you weren’t invited?”

“Whatever, pon. The problem is Palette, pon. At the get-together, Palette apparently announced they would use their vacation to go visit your exam venue, pon.”

“Huh? What for?”

“Apparently, Palette made this impassioned speech about just how much they don’t like magical-girl anime these days, pon. And then they were talking big about how since your exams had once produced *Magical Daisy*, then there was certain to be a future star here, pon.”

“But it would be impossible for a mascot from the PR Department to know where I’m holding the exam.”

“Palette’s had a long career, pon, and that means they know a lot of magical girls and mages, pon. If they make use of those connections to pull strings in Magical Girl Resources, they could find out that the exam’s being held in N City, pon. And then if Palette starts sniffing around where they shouldn’t…”

Cranberry’s eyebrows pulled tightly together. “What a nuisance, right when we’re finally about to begin…”

“You’ve got that right, pon. We’ve got a sixteenth girl, this coming up right when everything was ready and we just have to give the order… It’s a disaster, pon. All we want is to hold secret killing games without bothering anyone else, but that stupid animal had to butt in, pon.”

“We couldn’t eliminate them?”

“Palette did declare openly with lots of people watching and listening that they were going to where your exam’s being held, pon. So if Palette disappeared, you’d be under suspicion, pon.”

“We’ve gathered even more talented magical girls than usual for this exam.” Cranberry smacked a hand on her knee and stood

from the bed. Springs creaked and dust flew. “I will not allow Palette to obstruct things. I won’t call it off, either. And neither do I intend to show any leniency in this exam.”

“So then what do we do, pon?”

Relaxing the brows that had been knit, Cranberry smiled. “You think up something, Fav. This is the sort of thing you’re here for, isn’t it?”

☆ Palette

Using a cell phone game to gather candidates had never been done before. Even if Cranberry wasn’t as experienced as Palette, she was still a fair veteran. And even though she was a veteran, she still thought up new methods and made use of them. Palette could see flexibility and give there. Palette had heard her mascot was a digital fairy, so maybe that was where the proposal had come from.

By the time Palette crossed a bridge and saw the blue sign that read ENTERING N CITY, it was already evening. After that, in an empty back alley, Palette checked the N City magical-girl aggregate site. The big school clock showed 7:00 PM. Palette stepped out onto a major street where rumors said there were quite a lot of magical-girl sightings, and sneaked under a taxi parked there.

Palette had not only the physical abilities of an animal, but also an animal’s sense of smell. Also, since Palette’s scent was reminiscent of an animal, some had also turned up their noses at them for “stinking like a beast,” but that was irrelevant right now.

While Palette was sniffing underneath the car, searching for the scent of magical girls, they heard people talking.

“That cowgirl-looking lady just now—wasn’t she a magical girl?”

“The one in front of the karaoke place? Now that you mention it, weren’t people saying something like that on the aggregate site, too? But man, you don’t seriously think magical girls exist, do you? It’s cosplay, come on.”

What perfect timing.

Passing under the car from the rear to the front, then coming out onto the road to slip underneath driving cars, Palette turned a corner to arrive in front of the karaoke parlor. They sniffed, checking the area while keeping out of sight as they approached the

source of a smell. Tiny heart thumping as the smell grew and grew, they felt excitement overflow in their body—

There she is!

It was a girl in a ten-gallon hat. She was in front of some parked black sedans with tinted windows, surrounded by men with clothes and hairstyles that did nothing to hide their affiliation with organized crime.

Her motif was that of a Wild West gunslinger, but it was also a provocative costume. Her pale-blond hair shone under the neon lighting. In this vulgar locale, she wore a coquettish expression, and she was surrounded by rough and boorish men in loud-colored shirts and gold chains, but despite that, she was beautiful.

Ohh, Palette thought. This looked like she was facing off against real-life criminal organizations—the very thing that had caused so much controversy with the *Magical Daisy* anime.

So there are still magical girls like that these days, Palette thought, impressed, gazing at her. Their thoughts going back in time, Palette's heart began running off into a world of fantasy. *She could be the second coming of Magical Daisy—couldn't we depict battles with realistic violent organizations?* And then Palette noticed. There was something off about the atmosphere.

No matter how much time passed, there was no sense that a battle was about to start. The various passersby just gave the crowd looks of fright as they went past. The men yelled and caused a ruckus, the very picture of outlaws with no care for how others saw them. The girl tapped the shoulder of the man beside her and said something, and the men around burst into laughter. The girl and the men were all laughing together.

She wasn't fighting them, like Magical Daisy. She knew these people—they were her associates. But it wasn't like they were purely friends. Palette sharpened the nose they were so proud of, picking up a scent of fear that brought pain along with it. It was the men packed around the magical girl who were afraid.

The girl in the ten-gallon hat accepted a hip flask from the rough hand that offered it and tossed back its contents. One of the men said something with a worried expression, but she snorted in response, raising her right hand, and when she did, the men around laughed in amusement. Though superficially they seemed to be laughing and enjoying themselves, a tension hung around them. It was as if these tough men who made violence their business were

tossing around between them a bomb that could explode at any time, and they didn't know what could set it off.

Those types of people had feared Magical Daisy, too, but this felt different. A shiver went down Palette's spine all the way to the tip of their tail. This was far beyond inappropriate for a magical girl.

The group of criminals disappeared into a building, and Palette released the breath they had been holding. *How could a magical girl as great as Musician of the Forest, Cranberry, merely let that be?* Palette thought indignantly, but then remembered, *Oh yeah, she's still just a candidate*, and was convinced that she would naturally fall out of the running.

It was approaching the time of day when there would be more drunken people around downtown.

"There was a lady dressed like a nun, but there's no churches around here, right?"

"That had to have been one of those magical girls everyone's talking about."

"No way."

Overhearing such a conversation from passersby, Palette once again ran off.

Tracing the smell of a magical girl, Palette entered a supermarket that had been shut down. With a menacing look, they chased off the rats that showed up, then perked up their ears and sniffed, focusing all the nerves in their body into smell and hearing.

They could hear voices. The smells were getting stronger, too. It was the voice of a girl, the smell of a girl. And not just one. Two mingled together.

As silently as possible, Palette proceeded step by tiny step—

Found you!

There was a gentle, delicate-seeming nun with nevertheless a sense of sacrilegious allure. Then there was a short-haired girl in a coat. She was simple in appearance, looking almost like a regular person, but she radiated the kind of beauty unique to magical girls.

The two magical girls were whispering to one another. There was no way they could know about Palette secretly watching over them from the shadows as they giddily chatted away. Even just watching them talk, Palette could tell they were happy. It eased Palette's heart, after they had gotten worked up by that gunslinger.

The tenderhearted holy lady and the friend who protected her. The friendship between two girls was so heartwarming, it would even come off a bit cheesy.

Hiyoko and Miyo, Riccabel and Teimi, Cutie Altair and Cutie Vega, Magical Daisy and Minako. Friendship was always a vital element of magical-girl anime.

At some point in the story, obstacles would come up that would cause cracks in their relationship, and then they would resolve the misunderstanding, and their bond of friendship would become even tighter, tying the two of them even more strongly together. Palette put together the plot in their head, the two magical girls whirling around in their imagination.

Five minutes later.

The two of them held hands, leaning together as they whispered to one another. Maybe it would be better to think of a slightly higher age bracket. They were a little too close for Sunday mornings. A soft yuri-esque friendship. This was it.

Ten minutes later.

The two girls were still pressed together. It didn't seem like just not airing in the morning would be enough here. Maybe it'd be appropriate for it to be aimed at the older demographic. *Late-night anime, let's go with that.*

Twenty minutes later.

Palette struck the nun-and-coat pair off the list along with the gunslinger.

These two are…a little…um, nope…

Palette had been watching, thinking it was wonderful they were so close, but observing how things were going, Palette understood their relationship was something more than that. Frankly, they were fooling around. Gestures such as bringing their lips close together or stroking each other's cheek were not appropriate for good little magical girls. Sensing that things were about to go even further, Palette left the abandoned supermarket. Palette was not in charge of eighteen-plus OVAs.

Just as Palette was thinking, *Okay, what's next?* they heard people's voices.

"That robot downtown, was that a costume or something?"

"Wasn't it a magical girl?"

"Magical girls and robots are different."

A robot. Someone who was both a magical girl and a robot could be a fresh take on things. Palette headed downtown. They hid in the shadow of an abandoned bicycle, then headed down the dark nighttime street. Down the street, there was a tiny light source, and it was moving—

That's it!

There she was. The street's shops were shuttered for the night, and few people passed by, but she was there. And she really was a robot. Though Palette had seen a lot of magical girls who looked like monsters or animals, a magical girl who looked purely like a robot was unusual.

A magical-girl anime with a robot as the lead. It had never been done before, but if they pulled it off, maybe they could attract not only fans of conventional magical girls, but fans of robot shows, too, and exploit a new fanbase. Themes like a confrontation between magic and science and a fusion of magic and science were not uncommon, and it wasn't like there were no magical girls who were cyborg-like and incorporated technological abilities, but there had never been a magical girl who was so exactly like a robot. To Palette, creating a new genre in the world of magical-girl anime was a worthy goal. Just imagining it made their heart leap.

The backpack-shaped boosters, the aircraft-style wings, the plastic feel to her—she looked like nothing other than a robot. And then her eyes flashed!

So bright…!

Shading their eyes with a forelimb, Palette watched the robot.

She was using the light that came from her eyes to shine under the vending machine. She squatted down, then made a gleeful cry in a voice that was mechanical, but vaguely human, too, pinching something metal in her fingers.

It was a hundred-yen coin. Yes, the robot was using her searchlight to look for spare change.

Shoulders slumping in disappointment, Palette immediately did an about-face and left the downtown area.

The sort of people who could relate to someone so fussy were in the minority. If you had as the protagonist someone who made use of their blessed nature of being both a robot and a magical girl to pick up small change, it seemed doubtful such a hero would win the support of the kids.

The next day, Palette headed back downtown and pricked up their ears. It seemed that magical girls were the number one thing that came up in conversations in this town.

"Hey, did you know the rumor that magical girls gather at the abandoned temple on top of the hill? Wanna go there later? I dare you."

"Uh, they're not ghosts. Magical girls in a temple, though… Why?"

Racing up a hill and passing through a gate that seemed like it could fall apart any minute, Palette edged under the eaves to sneak in. It was true that this situation might well be more suitable to ghosts than magical girls. Heart pounding not only from the excitement of searching for magical girls but with a little bit of fear, too, Palette made their way through the sooty temple. There were footprints in the dust. Someone was here. There was a faint light from inside. When Palette took a peek—

Magical girls! And lots, too!

There were five in total.

The first one to catch Palette's eye was one with large breasts and a white school swimsuit. In terms of visuals, she was too fetishistic, and not suited to the morning time slot. Also, she was kneeling on the floor for some reason, not even twitching, and it was eerie.

"Why are you so awful at learning things?!"

And the princess-style magical girl. She had too much of an attitude, and she was puffing out her flat chest, even though there was nothing there to show.

Hmm…

Palette circled around from behind a pillar to get a close look at her from the front. Narrowing their eyes further, Palette focused intently to see if they could glean anything from the faintest movements.

But as they were doing this, another magical girl's head blocked the view. A magical girl with dog ears was bowing her head low and saying, "I'm sorry…"

After bowing, the dog-eared magical girl made herself small, head (and ears) hanging. When a magical girl transformed, even if she started as an ordinary person, she would become bolder—but the dog-eared girl was shrinking up so much, it was pitiful.

"I told you digging holes in the yard would be dangerous!" said

the princess.

"But the yard has the best dirt for digging…"

"That's not what I'm talking about here!"

Being too timid wasn't a very good trait for a protagonist to have.

Palette circled around from behind the pillar to the shadow of a Buddha statue, and from the shoulder of the Buddha gazed down on the remaining pair of magical girls: two identical-looking angels. Now *this* was a valuable find.

From time immemorial, countless artists had made wonderful art with the motif of angels. The popularity of angels had never waned since they'd first come up in people's stories in the ancient past. And this wasn't just one angel—there were two. Twin angels, two for the price of one. You could create any kind of story around these girls.

Palette listened closely to the twins' chatting.

"Nice, nice, I got a new account."

"Okay, I'll tweet on this one, so you follow me."

Account? Follow?

"They won't accuse us of sockpuppeting anymore. You're so magi-cool, sis."

No way, they can't be…

"Let's go with a heaping serving of twin angel sightings."

That's.…that's…that's not good…!

Palette left the ruined temple with their heart full of sadness and their nostrils full of smelly mold.

Social media could be a minefield for magical girls. If these two girls were misusing it and caused a big stink one day, hopefully they had already blown it—that would be the better outcome. If something problematic they'd posted came to light after the anime aired, then anyone involved in the show would get the ax. Palette included.

In the dead of night, Palette left the temple and dashed through the darkness. Once the light of some houses was within sight, they heard some people talking.

"I heard someone saw a magical girl at the factory."

"Oh yeah?"

"The ruined factory in Kobiki."

"Was that the place where the owner ran off in the night with

his whole family?"

Pulling their magical phone out from their backpack, Palette checked where the Kobiki neighborhood was, then also checked the location of that factory and ran off again. This town was so considerate toward those searching for magical girls. The people here gossiped about them even this late at night.

Arriving at the factory, Palette picked up on a heavy magical-girl scent. With a determined sniff, they trailed it. Diving under the boards nailed in to seal off the place, Palette entered through a broken window to find a magical girl illuminated by the moonlight. Palette's predecessor had once said the light of the moon suited magical girls, and it particularly suited the one here.

Ohh…this is…

Her monochromatic *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* costume was plain, yet dramatic. Her skin had a sickly pallor to it, and the dark circles under her eyes further emphasized how ill she looked. Maybe it was just her color scheme, but someone with this kind of punch was memorable.

The Alice in black held a knife in her right hand. Before Palette had time to think hard about the combination of Alice and a knife, she dragged the blade over her own palm. Palette nearly yelled out, smacking both paws over their mouth. Blood dribbled from Alice's palm, but then immediately stopped. Alice scribbled down something in the notebook in her hand, then cut her wrist with the knife. She couldn't quite break the skin, so she stabbed at it more aggressively. The knife broke as blood spurted out of her like a fountain, then immediately stopped, and Alice wrote down something else.

"So I'm still okay, even after this…," she muttered quietly, and laid the broken knife down to the side. Standing up, she put both her hands on the wall and arched backward, then slammed her head hard against the wall. The whole factory shook. Another hit. Cracks ran along the wall, breaking it apart—debris went flying, and the steel girders creaked. At this rate, the place would collapse. Palette gave a yelp.

"Who's there?" Alice demanded, spinning around. Blood gushed from the wound at her forehead, and an even thicker substance dribbled out, tracing a vertical line of filth down her ashen face.

Palette turned tail and ran.

☆ Fav

"The plan was a success, pon."

"We did it."

In the dilapidated house with dust dancing in the air, mascot and magical girl quietly celebrated their plan's success.

Fav had temporarily hacked the aggregate site, shutting out information on magical girls like Snow White, La Pucelle, Ripple, and Top Speed. Further, he'd used his search function to make accurate predictions of where Palette would be, while Cranberry had used her magic to generate the sounds of regular people chatting about rumors to guide Palette, leading the mascot toward magical girls who were unsuitable for anime adaptations.

"You put together a fine ploy, Fav."

"Mary and Nana were pretty alarming by themselves, but I think Palette was even more shocked by Alice, pon."

"Alice still doesn't seem to have a grasp on her magic, after all, so she's testing all sorts of things."

"Hmm. So we could put off the exam a bit longer, pon."

"No, we have no guarantee there won't be further interference. Let's have Alice join in later and get it started right away."

☆ Palette

Hitching a free ride in the back of a truck, Palette left N City.

Palette was physically and mentally exhausted, yet they had gained nothing for their efforts. Releasing all the tension that had built up, surrounded by vegetables, Palette dozed and had a dream of a magical girl.

"Magical girls, even in my dreams…I really am a workaholic."

"Never mind that! Weren't there any magical girls who made you think, *Wow, she'd be great in an anime!*?" a magical girl in pajamas pressed, her expression one of deep interest.

But Palette pushed her forehead away, expression tired. "Either they're too niche, or not the right age demographic…"

"But there's so many good girls, though."

"You can't get an anime just by having a good personality."

"Strict standards, huh?"

"Yeah… But if I had to choose…"

“Choose?”

“No, never mind. Making an anime out of someone based on a hunch wouldn’t work out.”

“Whaaat? Who’d you choose? Tell me!”

Warding off the pestering pajama magical girl, Palette thought back on one magical girl they’d encountered in N City. The moment Palette laid eyes on her, their interest was piqued. Thinking back on it now, Palette realized she’d had a scent—the same scent shared by all the magical girls everyone talked about. “Maybe…”

“Maybe?”

“That girl might become a really big deal. A legendary magical girl who people will keep talking about, far into the future.”

“A legend! Wow, that’s amazing.”

But this was ultimately just Palette’s instinct. Even if Palette were to introduce her to others, saying, *“This is only a hunch, but I think this girl will be a big success!”* that wouldn’t make people be like, *“Okay, then let’s make an anime out of her!”*

“So? Which magical girl is it?” the girl in pajamas pressed. “The one in white? Or the ninja?”

“Well…I can’t say. I mean, it’s just a hunch.”

“Boo, that’s mean.”

“But you know. If…if she passes Cranberry’s exam, then I might come back to N City. Though, if possible, I would rather not come again…”

She had looked like an ordinary magical girl, with nothing particularly special about her. But the farther Palette got from her, the more she lingered in their mind. Palette even got the feeling they could envision a future where everyone extolled her great achievements.

Still thinking about the magical girl Ruler, Palette sank into a deeper sleep.

This is a new story written for this book.

Guns or Roses?

This story is set when there aren't yet many magical girls in the town where the *Magical Girl Raising Project* game first starts.

Anime

SPOILER-O-METER

Read this after watching **episode six** of the anime, pon!

Guns or Roses?

It had always been true that much of the magical-girl recruitment exam was up to the discretion of the examiner, and many gifted people would be passed over. For example, if you searched for eligible candidates in schools that had lots of girls, you would only find those who attended school. Shut-ins who stayed at home, those who were sick in the hospital, or those who worked would fall through the cracks. But still, since an examiner and mascot alone could never be expected to cover absolutely everything within a recruitment region, they had to resign themselves to the fact that a certain number of oversights were inevitable, targeting only places where the most girls gathered.

They'd had no choice but to do that—until now. From now on, things were different.

If an examiner made use of the mobile game *Magical Girl Raising Project* in a recruitment exam, it would greatly reduce overlooked targets. Whether she was a housewife struggling to get by or a popular manga artist or a freeloading lawyer or a lacquerware craftswoman who had been designated a Living National Treasure—if she had an environment where she could play the game as well as the magical aptitude, then she could become a magical girl…maybe.

If you compared the exams thus far to fishing with a pole, then this exam would be a trawling net. It would mean even more participants, even greater talents, and even more powerful magical girls.

Or so said the mascot Fav in his brilliant speech about how wonderful this examination strategy was.

However, the Musician of the Forest, Cranberry, pointed at the screen of her magical phone with disinterest. "Can we really place such trust in this?"

"Whoa there, are you some sort of technology skeptic, pon?"

“I’m concerned that perhaps having it pick up all people within range, rather than the examiner directly looking at people to select, might make a difference in the type of people who are chosen.”

“Don’t worry about that, pon. I know if you were the type to reject new technology, you wouldn’t have Fav, the latest and greatest digital fairy, with you.”

Cranberry closed her eyes and gave a silent shrug.

Fav somersaulted in the opposite direction from before, scattering gold dust. Before it melted into the air, he beat his wings to make the dust disappear.

“I won’t make complaints about you, though, Fav.”

“And it’s got other new functions, too. For example, if you’ve got this new model terminal, then with master access, you hold the power of life and death over the examinees, pon. You can carry out the exam in total ease and safety, no matter what happens, pon.”

Cranberry brought her eyebrows together as if she saw this as quite loathsome and spat, “Worthless. That’s the very sort of thing I would prefer to handle myself and not leave to a machine.”

“So then we do our best, pon. We’ve already got the ball rolling with the exam, pon. I can’t have you being so indifferent about this forever. The candidates caught in this net surpass those in regular exams in both quality and quantity, pon.”

Cranberry didn’t reply. She turned her back to the magical phone and stood by the windowsill, putting her hand on the frame to look outside. The wind blew in, making the torn curtains sway and the curtain rod creak. “Greater than regular exams in both quality and quantity, you say?”

“Yeah. Is there some kind of problem, pon?”

With the middle finger of her right hand, Cranberry *tap-tapped* against her forehead, then expelled a deliberate-sounding sigh. After that sigh—so long it seemed it might even reach out and grab Fav’s hologram—she muttered as if to herself, but also like she wanted him to hear:

“*That* is high quality?”

◇◇◇

Cranberry thought of pretransformation profiles as not even fit to make tissue paper. She didn’t give that sort of thing any weight

when it came to examinees—in fact, she completely ignored it. Even if Fav wrote up documents about it, she wouldn't look at them. To Cranberry, the result—the magical girl—was the important thing, and the means to that result, her life as a human, just polluted that.

Fav was different.

Human lives had history, and history had weight. Even if a girl seemed ordinary and common at a glance, even if she tended to look like some kind of template, there would be no other like her. No matter how boring a life might be, it was her world, and her death was the end of her world. That was exactly why people feared a death unsought for and would try to escape it.

What was so interesting about Monster A showing up to be defeated by the hero? When you had a grasp on Monster A's name, family, personal history, personality, interests, way of thinking, principles and opinions, ideology—*everything*—knowing Monster A just about as well as Monster A knew themselves, then Monster A stopped being a nameless NPC, and that was what made it a fun spectacle when the hero killed it.

In that sense, a profile of their time as human was important. Calamity Mary, the first magical girl from *Magical Girl Raising Project*, was unique, and that was something to be appreciated. Fav had gotten just a little bit sick of pubescent kids who would get all heated up if you made so much as a pass at them before becoming deluded about their own heroism, only to die.

"Late thirties, violent against her daughter, alcoholic, abandoned by her husband and daughter, life gone to seed and living alone."

If you were the boring kind of examiner, that profile alone might make you stamp her as disqualified. Fav couldn't quite imagine the expression that would appear the moment such a unique figure was killed. Would she give up, or struggle, or beg for her life, or would some kind of wisdom of adulthood enable her to escape from her predicament? Before even meeting her, Fav was looking forward to her death. And so Fav headed out to meet Calamity Mary—Naoko Yamamoto.

"Congratulations, pon. You've been chosen as a magical girl, pon."

Already transformed by Fav, Mary looked at his hologram, heard his voice, and didn't really react. She tapped her phone

screen and ended the quest. Fav looked around the room. Magazines and cardboard boxes from online purchases were scattered about, and stuffed garbage bags were just left there on the floor. There was a broken plastic umbrella and a tricycle lying on its side, and all over the kitchen table and floor were rows and rows of empty bottles.

Fav had never seen a room like this before, and the novelty of it satisfied him, so he waited for Mary's reaction. After finishing the quest, Mary headed for the shop and chose to use candy she'd earned in the quest to repair her weapons. Then she upgraded her weapons, purchased a magic pack, checked her remaining candy, and quietly muttered, "Shit," and then, most likely in order to participate in a limited-time quest with a good reward, she headed straight from the shop to the quest reception desk—

"Hey, why're you ignoring me, pon? Fav won't let you say you never noticed something as impressive as Fav, pon. There's no way you could have not heard my sweet voice like a charming little woodland creature's, pon."

Mary didn't answer, eyes on her phone.

"Huh? Why? I think if you take a look at yourself in a full-length mirror, you'll understand, pon. Don't you have a mirror somewhere, pon? A sink or bathroom mirror would work, though, pon."

Mary checked that there were no upcoming quests posted, then headed to the coliseum.

"Heeey, liiiisten. Fav's never gotten a reaction like this before. It's bewildering, pooon."

Picking up the pale-blue booze bottle sitting beside her, Mary poured the liquid into her mouth, and then, with slow movements of her throat, swallowed it down. With a heavy burp, she turned back to her phone.

A thought hit Fav. "Wait, you don't think you're hallucinating because of the alcohol, do you, pon? No, no, there's no way you could see this so clearly if Fav were a hallucination, pon. Fav may be fantastical, but still, stop with those kinds of coping methods, pon. You were chosen to be a real magical girl, okay? Did you hear that, pon?"

It took ten minutes to get her to acknowledge his existence, and then another ten minutes to get her to go check that he wasn't lying about her being a magical girl. Calamity Mary did not jump up in

shock or bounce around in joy. With an expression like, *"Guess this stuff happens,"* her mouth twisted in a smile that reached her eyes.

"So, Cranberry, I'm asking you to take on the role of her mentor, pon."

"Why me?"

"She's the first magical girl in N City, pon—this is a premium event, something to commemorate. Fav would rather have you showing her how a magical girl should be, rather than Fav taking on the role of mentor, pon."

Fav did not say what he really was thinking by asking Cranberry to be her mentor—that it seemed like it would be interesting to have the two meet. Fav made sure to explain to Cranberry that she had to commit to acting as a participant, and not to forget that she was the first magical girl chosen by Fav, while Mary was the second. He then arranged for the two of them to meet on the roof of the tallest building in the Kounan district.

Calamity Mary had her hand on the brim of her ten-gallon hat as she rudely stared at the first magical girl she'd ever seen besides herself.

By contrast, Cranberry bowed her head deeply, putting on a courteous attitude. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Calamity Mary. I am called Musician of the Forest, Cranberry."

"Uh-huh."

Cranberry specialized in being an examiner. She knew what sort of magical girls the Magical Kingdom sought out, and she was capable of explaining that to examinees, too. However, since she believed herself that such magical girls were unnecessary, her explanation was completely apathetic. And Mary didn't care, either, her posture languid as she listened. Occasionally Cranberry would slip into a droning monotone, just reciting the words she'd memorized, while Mary yawned and drank her booze, not taking any of it seriously.

Fav observed, practically giddy. It would be bad if they were to suddenly clash and the exam were to be ruined, but he did hope something interesting would happen.

Once she'd more or less finished her explanation, Cranberry asked Mary, "Do you have any questions?"

Mary tilted back her square bottle and loudly gulped down her booze.

Then she wiped her mouth with the back of her right hand and clanged the bottom of the booze bottle against the metal railing. “You’re saying you’re my ‘mentor’ magical girl.”

“Yes.”

“The game was only released a week ago.”

“Yes, so it was.”

“In other words, even though you’re calling yourself more experienced, you only became a magical girl a week before me.”

“Well, I suppose that’s true.”

“Why’re you looking down on me? With only a week’s worth of difference, at a school or workplace, it’s not a vertical relationship; you’re equals. Am I wrong? If there’s some other reason you’re playing mentor and giving me arrogant bullshit when you only became a magical girl a week earlier than me, then I’m listening.”

Cranberry and Mary stared at each other in silence. There was a distance of five large steps between them, which was unnaturally far apart for two people having a conversation. The wind at the top of this building tossed up Mary’s hair and made Cranberry’s roses flutter. Mary closed one eye, and Cranberry blew a breath out her nose.

“Forgive me,” said Cranberry. “That wasn’t my intention… I apologize if my attitude appeared arrogant.”

“Hmph.”

Mary knew that Cranberry’s apology was not in earnest, and Cranberry was aware that Mary knew. A dry, tense air, like the wind blowing over a wasteland, wafted between the two of them. They both could sense that what lay between them could go off at any minute.

This wasn’t anything so gentle as two warriors who acknowledged one another tossing a ball back and forth, testing the waters to see if they would fight or not. They were simply irritated, angry. These two did not get along.

Mary popped up her right hand, and Cranberry’s left twitched in response. “Is it cool if I ask a question?” said Mary.

“Go ahead.”

“I get that you said to do good things for people, but…you didn’t say not to do bad stuff, huh?”

“Because everyone understands that, without my expressly saying.”

The air grew tense. Fav realized he really shouldn’t have let his

curiosity get the better of him. The two girls had never meshed from the start. Fav didn't want a pointless fight before the exam got started.

Cranberry gave a thin smile, while only the corners of Mary's mouth turned upward. They continued to hold each other's gaze for a while.

Cranberry looked away first, then slowly opened her mouth and broke the silence. "If your misdeeds are exposed, your qualifications as a magical girl will be revoked, and you will be made to forget ever being a magical girl. And depending on what you did, you may be handed over to human authorities."

"Heh." Mary chuckled deep in her throat, but she didn't seem amused. "Outlaws get hanged, huh?"

"That depends on the degree of your misdeed."

Mary took another swig of her booze but didn't ask any further questions. That was it. Cranberry told Mary to contact her if she had any issues, and then she left. She went from building to building, heading back to her roost without another word.

Some people could never become friends. You could list countless reasons as to why, but the fact was, the people in question wouldn't really know the answer themselves—was their lack of friendship due to those very reasons, or was it because they couldn't become friends that they could come up with endless reasons why not?

Even if Fav were to tell Cranberry to restrain herself until the exam began, Fav didn't know to what extent she would listen to him. Cranberry's apparent age was older than the average for magical girls, but deep down, she was no different from when they'd first met. For instance, she would stay stuck in a sour mood for a long time until Fav would eventually have to be the one to give in, or Cranberry would stop talking to him.

Ultimately, Fav would have to be the one to make adjustments. He would take care to keep Cranberry and Mary from meeting, and he would never bring up Cranberry in conversation in front of Mary. With Cranberry, on the other hand, he would avoid touching on the issue of Mary as much as possible, leaving coordinating roles to another appropriate magical girl when possible. After this much

consideration, Fav regretted his shortsighted inability to resist his urges, his idea that it would be interesting if the two met. Even knowing from experience that when you let curiosity guide your actions, it would generally not get good results, he'd carelessly gone and done it anyway.

Fav regretted it for the umpteenth time, and reflected on it for the umpteenth time. He would not have Cranberry act as mentor in the future. He would make it a volunteer job, and Fav would handle the next one. Though it would be a hassle, when he thought of the hassle that had been brought about by having Mary and Cranberry meet, it was nothing.

After some minor adjustments to the plan, Fav got to the point where he figured there should be no more problems. But that didn't last long—immediately a new problem came up. The next accident came from the outside.

When Fav heard about it, he was mad. Feeling stupid for getting mad, he became exasperated with himself, and then he felt sad. Why did someone have to get in the way right when this fun exam was about to start?

It had begun just the other day, at the magical-girl exam held in T City in the neighboring prefecture, where the prefectural office was. One girl had gone through a legitimate exam and passed without issue. They said her magic was to "create creatures from fantasy," and in the exam she had showed off that ability many times to the examiner. However, the management had not been attentive. One of the creatures created by her magic during the exam had escaped, and, tracking it, they'd learned it was hiding itself deep in the mountains of M City, which neighbored N City.

Though the girl could create creatures, she was unable to dispel them at will. She also lacked the skills to search out a creature that hid in the mountains. She'd consulted her magical-girl examiner, and that examiner had reported it to the Magical Kingdom, and the Magical Kingdom, learning that the exemplary magical girl Musician of the Forest, Cranberry, was holding an exam nearby, had asked her, while she was managing her exam, if she would also capture or kill the creature.

Frankly speaking, they'd chosen the right person for the job. Cranberry was, as her name suggested, used to wilderness operations, and no creature alive could escape from her sharp

hearing. Most of all, with her excellent combat abilities, she could take down even a fierce beast created by magic in a fraction of a second.

"This is nice for you, pon. It sounds like this is a mission that comes with a fight, pon."

"It's not as if I'm glad to fight simply anybody. According to the data, it's not as strong an opponent as a magical girl. If we're classifying this job as either interesting or boring, it's the latter."

Even if Cranberry was the right choice for the task, neither she nor Fav was so naive as to think, *So they think I'm good!* simply because of that. Being made to wipe someone else's ass made Fav feel weary, and it also felt vaguely ominous that this was happening at the start of the magical-girl exam. So Fav was feeling highly unexcited as the two of them headed to M City.

The magical girl who had created the creature had apparently asked to be allowed to participate in the hunt. However, she'd been politely turned down. Having one more person to protect would cause more work for Cranberry. And if Cranberry got more work, then Fav would get more work, too. That was not a good thing.

Unlike N City, which had been forcibly expanded through a merger, M City was extremely small, a town deep in the mountains that was less a city and more like a village. It was so deep in the mountains that they said periodically, about once every ten years or so, some old woman would get lost hunting for wild edible plants, and even during the day the forest was dark, keeping even the locals from going in too far. But for Cranberry this wasn't much different from going for a stroll around a resort grounds at midday. As she carried out a careful search via echolocation, Fav held back his grumbling.

She pushed past branches and thickets, and then, after thirty minutes of making their way in, said, "I figure that's it."

"They said it looks like a bear, so that's gotta be it, pon."

The two of them found it easily. With its dark-brown pelt, sharp claws and fangs, and beast-like ears, at a length of six feet, it did very much resemble a bear.

Suddenly the sky grew dim. A cloud was hiding the moon.

Perhaps the creature had been angered by being called a bear, or maybe it was irritated by the disappearance of the light, because it let out a growl. It even sounded like a bear. Mowing down vegetation, it bounded toward Cranberry. She stood in a natural

posture, waiting for it.

The creature swiped a claw, and the force of its wind alone swept up the plants around it. Nimbly evading the strike, Cranberry came close to grab the creature's arm, hitting its elbow with a backhand blow and bending its joint in the opposite direction.

The creature cried out in pain, wildly swinging around the arm Cranberry held in her grip. The force sent her flying, and she spun in the air to land—from there leaping back at the creature, slipping past its clawed counterattack to grab the creature's leg. The creature fell on its rear, and, pressing its ankle against her side, Cranberry twisted it in one motion. Its leg still in her grasp, the creature flailed its arms, but perhaps because of the pain, its movements were sloppy.

Cranberry was not one to overlook an opening. Avoiding its arms, she spun them both around to circle behind it, wrapped her arm around its neck, and grabbed it by the jaw to snap it, then gave it a half turn in the opposite direction, pulverizing it entirely. The creature collapsed forward into a prostrate position and made no movement other than spasming. Well, Fav had figured things would wind up like this.

"All right, then, let's take the body and go back, pon."

Cranberry was looking off in another direction. Fav turned that way and zoomed in with his vision—noticing a shadow moving, he felt quite fed up. There were three more bearlike creatures threatening them with exposed fangs. "Why are there more of them, pon?"

"They're creatures created with magic. It's not strange that they would multiply."

"You don't think the stork is working too hard here, pon?"

"Quite." Cranberry swept her gaze from right to left. The tips of her ears twitched. "The stork is indeed working too hard."

She hooked the leg of the first creature as she passed by it, slamming it into the second, and when the third's path was blocked by the two beasts entangled, she slammed her fist into its face. Fur and flesh flew, and when she withdrew her fist from the indent in its face, a string of sticky blood hung off it. Cranberry approached the first and second before they could get back up, and with only the slightest movements, gouged with her fingernails into the spines of the enemies at the neck. When the fourth came to attack from behind, she crouched to dodge, then placed her hands on the

ground to slam a kick into its jaw without even looking back.

"…A fourth one?!"

And that wasn't the end of it. A fifth and sixth drew near, and then, as if they'd timed it, a seventh, eighth, and ninth appeared. Cranberry kicked each one to knock it aside, twisting the arm of the tenth and using it as a shield to crash into the eleventh, kicking all of them down.

She could hear loud growls coming from all over. This wasn't just ten or twenty. The smell of beast and blood hung over the area, drowning out the scent of the earth, trees, and grass.

"Why are there so many more, pon?"

"The magical girl who created them is a newbie. She must not have a proper grasp on her magic."

"So irresponsible, pon!"

"I never thought I would hear that word coming from your mouth, Fav."

The creatures made to charge all at once, but when they took a step forward, their upper bodies all snapped violently backward. Next, hammers of sound battered their arms and their legs, and once their legs took a hit, they thudded to the ground.

Fav was privately surprised. Cranberry was using her magic. She loved hand-to-hand combat, so she only chose to use magic to attack when her opponents forced her into a corner.

Cranberry approached the enemy with a casual stride, then tapped a thick shoulder with her fingertip. Instantly the creature's whole body vibrated wildly, bodily fluids pouring from its mouth, eyes, nose, and ears to scatter all around. By sending sound reverberating inside its body, she'd done massive damage to its organs, the brain in particular. Cranberry wove in between the creatures, and any that approached her spewed liquid as it thumped to the ground.

Stepping over the piled corpses of their brethren, more creatures attacked Cranberry one after another, adding mass to the mountain of bodies. But the creatures' morale never flagged, beast after fresh beast marching forward as if their purpose was death, coming to Cranberry one after another.

"There's no end to it." Cranberry sounded excited. Before the creatures could strike, she hit them with destructive sound wave, and their bodies swayed, swelled up, and collapsed. "There's no sign their numbers are decreasing."

She struck a creature's knee with her heel, and, using that knee as her springboard, she thrust her elbow into its gut, doing a half turn in the air to strike its back with a spinning turn kick, sending it to the ground facedown. Cranberry ran backward to put some distance between them, and then, when the creatures pursued her, she blasted a directional destructive sound wave right in the center of where they gathered, sending them flying—grass and earth and all, bodies dancing high in the sky, trees breaking, bouncing, and rolling on the ground.

Gouging into the earth like that, the enemy now stood that much lower. A creature cut through the clouds of dust, swinging its claws, and Cranberry avoided its attack, destroying one, two, three creatures from the inside with her sound while she kicked off the chest of a fourth to leap backward, jump off a tree, then hit the ground to bound away.

She evaded the arm that tossed up fallen leaves as it shot out from the ground, and when another beast came falling down from above the trees, she used its momentum to throw it, slamming its head into the ground. There were more large bodies writhing ahead.

Sneak attacks didn't work on Cranberry—no matter how cleverly you camouflaged them, even if you lay still to hide, you couldn't completely silence every sound of your body. However, warding off every single surprise attack would consume a lot of time and wear on her nerves.

"Cranberry, behind you, pon."

"You don't have to tell me."

She avoided the arm of a creature that was trying to grab at her, then struck back at it with a three-strike combo, spinning around to hit it in the side with a spear hand. She lightly stroked legs, arms, and head, and each time a spray of blood went up, dyeing Cranberry a dark red. Thick drops from the splatter dribbled from her long ears and the blossoms of her roses. She tried to block one creature's body slam with her shin, but there was too much force in its charge, so she let the block fall, turning away from the momentum as she circled to the front around the axis of the creature's head, then circled farther around behind it to pound continuous strikes on its back, waist, and ankles.

Right before the creature fell, its throat trembled with a particularly loud growl, and Cranberry struck it with the blade of

her foot to crush its jugular. The other creatures roared, as if goaded by the first cry, and Cranberry's right eyebrow twitched upward.

Cranberry could pick up the faintest noises with her sharp hearing, and she fought based on auditory information. She wouldn't so much as twitch over just a yell, but being continuously showered with this roaring as she was trying to listen and also fighting so many enemies was gradually exhausting her. If she wanted to, she could shut out all sounds, but if she did that, she wouldn't be able to detect sneak attacks anymore.

Bending over to dodge a strike powerful enough to make the cedars sway with the force of its wind, she brandished a backfist as she turned around, laughing with glee.

But Fav wasn't laughing. The enemy's numbers were still increasing just as fast. "We need to request backup and evacuate the residents, pon."

"Unnecessary."

Cranberry turned aside a creature's arm, grabbed it by the leg, and spun it around to slam it into the ground. Its massive frame made a dent in the earth and rebounded, and Cranberry jumped off its back as the creatures gathered around her, punching, kicking, slicing them up with a knife hand, thrusting her fingers into an eyeball and ripping to the side, but her sleeve caught on a fang, and she was a split second late tearing it free. She leaped to evade the claws that swung at her from behind, but barely failed to dodge them entirely, and part of the back of her jacket was ripped off—Cranberry grabbed a tree branch and spun around it, landing a ways away.

"Cranberry."

"I decline."

Fav did not have the authority to request backup himself. He needed Cranberry's permission, but she stubbornly would not grant it. Cranberry wouldn't fear harm to her own reputation. So was she just enjoying this fight and trying to keep other magical girls from stealing her fun? But if the creatures were to bring harm to regular people now, the exam might be canceled.

"Cranberry!"

"Be quiet, please. You're distracting me."

A wave of sound burst throughout the whole area, striking the creatures. Cranberry heaved a broken tree over her shoulder, using

the jagged end to stab one of the creatures straight through its body. She then skewered a second creature that leaped at her along with it before tossing them both aside.

Dealing with those enemies had slowed her down, which was making Fav even more anxious. And if Fav was feeling anxious, there was no way Cranberry was unperturbed. She destroyed three creatures from a distance with sound, touched two at close range to destroy them from the inside with her magic, and the one that she'd missed she penetrated with a spear hand to the heart. But as Cranberry was about to withdraw her arm, the creature she'd stabbed embraced her to prevent her.

Cranberry dropped her other elbow on its arm in attempt to escape its grasp, but before she could slip away, another creature leaped at her. It hit her over a two-armed guard to knock her back, breaking branches, destroying trees as she rolled over the ground. While rolling, she smacked the ground with her right hand to jump to a tree trunk and met an enemy's attack with her elbow to destroy its joint, then knocked aside its follow-up attack with a sound wave. As she stood, a streak of blood drew a single red line down her forehead.

It wasn't any significant damage. It really was just the slightest scratch. However, it also meant that Cranberry had slowed down enough to be getting hurt. There was no way this nonstop melee was not wearing on her.

"Cranberry! Backup, pon!"

"As I've said, I don't need it. Irritatingly so."

She approached the creatures casually, without any hint of injury in her stride. They all fanned out, then charged. The herd of giant creatures all running at full speed made the ground shudder. The shaking quickly intensified, and a mechanical roar joined it as the area was illuminated by a bright light.

Knocking down trees and mowing away the plants, a bulldozer suddenly appeared, ramming into the herd from the side, making nasty sounds as it crushed the creatures. Some of them got up and tried to block the blades, but it was no use, and they were blown away. The girl in the driver's seat cursed the creatures with foul language that offended the ears, mashing the accelerator harder.

It was Calamity Mary.

Cranberry leaped. She hit the creatures with a flying kick, knee strike, and roundhouse kick to knock them down, and the bulldozer

swiveled with a lightness that belied its massive bulk. It seemed magic had been cast on it.

Hunched over, Mary got half out of her seat. She turned to her right and leveled a continuous stream of fire at the creatures from her dual-wielded handguns, lending no ear to their cries of pain, tossing the guns behind her when the ammo ran out, then pulling out new ones to shoot the creatures. Her perfect head shots made one head explode after another, and the creatures fell into piles before they could even touch the bulldozer. The bulldozer kept on charging straight toward Cranberry, and with a nimble leap she landed in the passenger seat back-to-back with Mary.

"Thank you very much," said Cranberry.

"Ha! You're welcome!"

Neither of them looked at the other as they exchanged those very mundane greetings, all sticky with blood. Of course Cranberry had killed plenty of the creatures, but Mary had also killed some serious numbers to get here. Cranberry could detect sounds from a few miles away, so there was no way she'd failed to notice Mary going on a rampage. That must have been why Cranberry had insisted that backup was "unnecessary."

The bulldozer plowed through the forest, the never-ending cycle of its blades destroying trees, plants, earth, rocks, creatures, everything, crushing it beneath them. They slaughtered enemy after enemy, Cranberry with sound, Mary with her guns. As they violently dropped enemies with frightening force and efficiency, Fav realized—the enemies' numbers were decreasing. They were killing more than were being generated.

The creatures seemed to sense they were losing and turned their backs to begin fleeing on all fours, but Mary and Cranberry had no intention of letting them go, and what had been a fight turned into a one-sided slaughter as flesh and blood rained down in an even more magnificent spectacle.

Mary laughed with glee, while Cranberry breathed a small sigh.

"What, not having fun?" Mary asked.

"Attacking from a safe distance with projectile weapons isn't to my taste."

"I'm having a hell of a time, though!"

"What nonsense…"

"Did you say something?"

"Why have you come here?"

“You looked like you were having fun, so I figured I’d join in.” And then she added, “I’ll put this on your tab, Miss Mentor.” And with that murmur, she fired her guns.

The expression on Mary’s face was nothing so simple as her words. With her brutality laid bare, she appeared beyond rationality, but the gears were still turning in her head. Why had Mary come here in the first place? Fav couldn’t imagine any reason other than that she had been trailing Cranberry. And the reason she had been trailing her would have been something like wanting to relieve her own stress. She wanted a place and a means to vent her urge to just go wild.

Thinking up a way to make things even more fun with Mary, he said to her, “Mary, where did you get those guns, pon?”

“Some police department.”

“That’s not good, pon.”

“Who cares where I got them? Just having them is illegal in this country, so there’s no point complaining about the source.”

“I’ll make up a list for you of groups in the city that’ll accommodate you, so go with them, pon.”

“If that’s your deal, then, well, I could consider it.”

What came next was petty labor. Cranberry would detect sounds, the bulldozer would go to their source, and the two mad warriors would annihilate the creatures. As the creatures fled pitifully, Mary laughed and Cranberry closed her eyes. Fav patiently observed the two magical girls.

He hadn’t been wrong—their personalities did clash. Cranberry’s number one priority was fighting. Mary’s priority was to make her opponents submit. If necessary, Cranberry would carry out acts of cruelty in the process without hesitation. Mary would, even if not necessary, carry them out with pleasure. Cranberry saw Mary’s methods—firing guns from a distance—as “not to her taste.” Meanwhile, when Mary witnessed Cranberry fight and use her magic, Mary thought (albeit the thought was concealed with mad laughter), *These crap weapons aren’t enough to go up against her.*

In every single way, these two clashed.

A few hours later, they finished their hunt in the mountains, and Mary left the bulldozer there to head back. That had to mean, *“You deal with that.”* Her parting remark of “I could get used to this” as well as her refreshed expression told any who saw it that she had

fulfilled her goal of unleashing some violence. Seeing her attitude, maybe she really was getting used to this.

Left behind, Cranberry and Fav looked up from the seat of the bulldozer at the mountain of creature corpses.

“Fav,” Cranberry said to her mascot.

“What, pon?” Fav replied.

“You said that with *Magical Girl Raising Project,* we can discover powerful candidates—you’re certain about that?”

“We should be getting magical girls of a type who’ve never been seen before…girls like Mary, pon.”

“The way she fights is utterly not to my preference, but if those of strength who could rival hers were to appear… I see, it seems this will be interesting.”

“So you’ve finally come around to it, pon?”

“Yes, I suppose.”

“Can I make the call now, then, pon? If you leave raw meat out for a long time in this weather, it’ll start to stink, pon.”

The pair, magical girl and mascot, burst into mismatched laughter.

This is a new story written for this book.

Alice in Hardgore Land

This story is set shortly before the magical candy competition begins.

Anime

SPOILER-O-METER

Read this after watching **episode seven** of the anime, pon!

Alice in Hardgore Land

☆ **Nemurin**

Her long pigtails fluttered out behind her and blurred into gradated colors of wind as she passed between the clouds. No matter where in this world you searched, there was nobody who could catch up to Nemurin's speed. Sound, lightning, Top Speed—Nemurin would leave them all in the dust. She was flying straight for her goal. She made no sound at all as she flew, but there was something lonely about that, so she said, "Zoooom!" as she rushed onward, cutting through cotton candy clouds, snacking on the cotton candy she cut through on the way to land on paved stone ground.

In that dream, they were celebrating the ascension of the queen to the throne.

"Long live Queen Ruler!"

"Queen Ruler!"

"She looked over here! Her Majesty just looked at me!"

Celebrating the birth of a new queen—beautiful, overflowing with intellect and charisma—the people sang, rejoiced, laughed, and whooped. Nemurin started to get into it, too. Scattering confetti made from cut-up origami paper all over, she bounced around more gleefully than anyone else. Nemurin's confetti turned into pink-and-white Favs, fluorescent-green-and-white Favs, wine-red-and-white Favs, and other vividly colored Favs that flitted through the air.

"You have terrible taste in colors, pon," said the real Fav.

"But they're so pretty," Nemurin replied.

"This is an infringement of portrait rights, pon."

"There's no such thing as portrait rights in dreams!"

"You've got a comeback for everything, pon."

"Nemurin is always right, ehem. But anyway…that Ruler, she's always doing the same stuff, in both other people's dreams and her own, huh?"

“Having a distinct character isn’t a bad thing, pon.”

Then the super, all-purpose information-gathering devices that grew from Nemurin’s head, the Nemurin Antennae, called out repeatedly in their shrill voices that a magical girl was falling asleep, so Nemurin flew straight off in the direction the antenna gave her. The festival celebrating the ascension of Queen Ruler to the throne shrank away, and a bullet train going across a wasteland came into view. Atop the bullet train there was a tiny angel, who said happily, “The bullet train card is fast, huh?”

“Ohh, this must be Minael’s dream,” said Nemurin.

“So then is this Minael or Yunael, pon?”

“Ah, and here comes another one.”

From beyond the horizon, the slow train was coming, kicking up clouds of dust as it ran along fast enough to rival the bullet train. There was a tiny angel sitting on top of that one, too, shouting, “Go, go!”

“Fav can’t even tell anymore, pon.”

“So what’s going on? Are the two of them having the same dream?”

“They’re twin magical girls, so Fav figures that would happen, pon.”

“I see, so that’s what it is.”

The dead heat between train CEOs Minael and Yunael was heading into its final stages when Nemurin’s antennae cried out, “A magical girl is having a dream!”

“Whoa, tonight’s quite the night,” said Nemurin. She left the twins’ race behind and flew off to a new dream.

“Whose dream is it this time, pon?”

“Ooh, there’s a house over there!”

A simple traditional-style house stood all alone in a grassy field, and seen from the outside, it really stuck out. But everything there —the mom hanging laundry in the yard, the dad clipping his nails on the veranda, the grandma watching TV dramas while sipping tea in the living room, the girl doing homework in her room, and the dog napping in its doghouse—looked ordinary, but happy.

“So that girl is a magical girl’s pretransformation form…,” Nemurin mused. “Or wait, no. Um, it’s not the mom, and it’s not the dad. It can’t be that the grandma is a magical girl, either… Oh, it’s the dog.”

“The dog, pon?”

“That’s Tama, see. Is Tama a dog, pretransformation?”

“No, she’s not, pon.”

“Then it’s, like, the type of dream where you dream you’re someone else.”

Tama, as a dog, curled up in her doghouse. Her apparent happiness was a soothing sight, but since there was nothing really happening here, the dream wasn’t exciting. Nemurin yawned wide.

Fav did a turn, scattering dust. “Nemurin, can Fav ask something, pon?”

“What? If it’s Magicaloid’s dream you wanna see, I’m not gonna do it. She does nothing but dream of filling a bathtub with money and jumping into it. I’m sick of it. I wish she’d just dream of electric sheep.”

“Who cares about that, pon? Are you going to keep on jumping from dream to dream, pon?”

“Yep.”

“Like always, pon?”

“That’s right.”

“Even though it can’t earn you magical candies in real life, pon?”

“You got it.”

“So then there’s no reason for Fav to be with you any longer, pon.”

“Really?”

“Fav is very busy right now, pon. Fav can’t be with you all the time, pon.”

“That’s harsh.”

“So good-bye, pon. You can call for Fav if something happens, but it’s just a hassle for Fav if you call over some dream thing, so Fav would appreciate if you didn’t call, if possible, pon.”

“Aren’t you being rather cold to Nemurin, here?”

“You’re imagining things, pon.”

“Doesn’t feel like it, though.”

“Yeah, yeah, then good-bye, pon.” Fav vanished, and even if Nemurin shook her magical phone, nothing would come up anymore.

Nemurin tossed the magical phone over her head, where it spun a few times, then vanished. If Fav wouldn’t come, then there was no reason to be carrying it around. Ever since the magical candy competition had begun, Fav had been nothing but busy. Nemurin

couldn't complain, though; he really did seem to have his hands full.

"But you know, Nemurin doesn't think it's right to say there's no meaning in what Nemurin does." Folding her arms with an expression of utmost seriousness, she stared up at the sky. Delicious-looking cotton candy clouds floated above, and a murder of crows was pecking at them.

"Nemurin saves magical girls when they're in trouble in their dreams. Even if there are some occasional screwups, surely Nemurin is being useful. And besides, when there are no magical girls dreaming, then Nemurin goes to beat up the bad dreams of non–magical girls. Nemurin has reformed space kaiju, given parachutes to people who were falling forever, resurrected people who got killed, resolved family troubles, brought back lovers who were about to leave their partners, gone out to places where people were in trouble because they didn't know the language and translated for them, and given clothing to people who suddenly found themselves alone and naked in the middle of town. These are all things only Nemurin can do. How can he say there's no point to this? A good dream is a small pleasure for people when their heart is tired, and once they're awake, it gives them energy for the day… I'm sure that's true, sometimes. Yeah, Nemurin is right after all." Nemurin was convincing herself when her antennae once again piped up, "A magical girl is having a dream!"

"Business is booming today, huh?" Nemurin said gleefully, probably not using that expression quite right.

Making three half drill-spins into the air, Nemurin floated up once, then zoomed rapidly over to her goal. If she wished it, she could arrive at her destination in a flash. With an audible *poof!* sound effect, she landed and examined her surroundings.

She was in a forest. Flowers with faces bloomed everywhere, and each one was singing pleasantly. The insects, the little birds, and the fish jumping in the puddles all had a wealth of humanlike expressions—some of the creatures cheerful, some of them sad, some looking like they'd been mocked, some chatting, some talking to themselves repetitively, some singing songs along with the flowers, all making noise as they pleased. And since they were competing with one another to be heard, it was a real racket.

Plugging her ears, Nemurin wondered, *Which magical girl would have a fantasy kind of dream like this? I was just in Ruler's. Yunael and*

Minael were having a race, right? La Pucelle prefers a more hard-core type of fantasy, and Sister Nana and Winterprison's are a little on the risqué side. Calamity Mary's are more decadent, Snow White's are a little quieter, and this is different from Top Speed's vibe, too.

Nemurin pondered further. "Well, rather than thinking about whose dream it is, it'd be faster to find her, huh?"

Hearing a scream like ripping silk, Nemurin flew off.

A massive dodo bird was sitting to the side of an animal trail. Blood was scattered all around it, and the dodo's large feet were sticky and covered with blood.

Nemurin landed beside the dodo. "That's a lot of blood. You don't seem okay, but are you okay?" she asked.

The dodo answered in a low, resonant voice, "No, I'm not hurt."

"Huh, really? You're bleeding so much, though."

"Well…I stepped on this girl who leaped out from the side, and she bled a whole lot… I was thinking, *Oh no, what have I done*, but then she got right up and ran off. I'm worried about her. I think it's bad for your health to run while bleeding that much."

"You're right, that could be bad, huh? Which way was she running?"

"Over that way. I called out to her, but maybe she didn't hear."

Had that girl been the magical girl? Nemurin ran off after her right away, but then turned back, figuring she might as well clean up. She stuck up her index finger and spun it around. The blood on the ground was absorbed into the earth, and the blood all over the dodo's feet melted into the air and vanished.

"When thinking won't get you anywhere, it's best to make like you didn't see anything." With that advice, Nemurin flew off.

Rising to a higher altitude, heading in the direction the dodo had pointed, she found her. "There! That's the girl!"

A girl who looked like Alice from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, only in funeral colors, was alone, running.

"Hmm? Wait…who's that?"

Nemurin was the boss of the chat, so she knew all the magical girls of N City. At a glance she'd know, "Oh, that's so-and-so." But she'd never seen this magical girl before. She was an Alice dressed in black, with an unhealthy look to her: sickly white skin and heavy dark circles under her eyes. This dream didn't seem to be like Tama's, where the subject was dreaming she was someone else. That meant this was the new, sixteenth magical girl Fav had

mentioned before.

Nemurin floated down and came right up to the girl to see her face, but the girl was heedless, continuing to stare straight ahead as she ran.

"That's some incredible concentration," Nemurin remarked. "It's like all she can see is her goal. It's amazing, but…a little scary."

What was this magical girl running after? Nemurin didn't even have to ponder it. A white rabbit was dashing off ahead of her. It was a girl wearing a costume with the motif of a white rabbit, white all over with a cute bunny-ear hairband on her head—aside from the bunny ears, she looked exactly like a magical girl Nemurin knew. However, since she never turned around, she couldn't see her face, so Nemurin couldn't say for sure.

The magical girl in white must not have noticed the Alice in black chasing her, as she kept on running without turning around. Why was the Alice in black chasing the girl in white? Was she obligated to chase a white rabbit, being an Alice? Or was there some other reason?

"Hmm… Hmmm, what is this feeling I'm having here? This is kind of getting interesting."

Emerging from the forest to head into the mountains, the girl in white climbed up and up, and the Alice in black ran after her. The girl in white finally arrived at the mountain's summit, then raced down off a towering cliff. The Alice in black followed, spreading her arms and legs to dive off the top of the cliff.

"Ohh, so she can fly, too, huh?" Nemurin said. Not one to be beaten, she dived after the girls. The Alice in black headed for the ground at intense speed, and by the time Nemurin realized, "Wait, isn't she just free-falling?" the girl landed—or rather she collided with the ground.

The result was not the slapstick-style human-shaped hole that Nemurin had predicted—the girl's fate was a realistic one, and the shock of the impact turned her into a lump of flesh and blood. It was the height of grotesquerie. *Oh crap,* Nemurin thought, and put a censor mosaic over it. That made it a bit better.

The magical girl in white, whom Alice hadn't even been able to catch, even in free fall, safely raced on down and continued running. This dream was brutal to the end.

It seemed this was the type of dream that ended when the dreamer died. It was rare for a magical girl to have that kind. It was more common for magical girls to do what they wanted in their dreams.

"The poor thing… If I'd known she would die, I would've stopped her."

When Nemurin approached the pink mosaic, the meat lump underneath it trembled. In a heartbeat the lump took human form, and before Nemurin could even be surprised, it became Alice, who brushed aside the mosaic and ran off again.

"Huh? What? She's not dying?"

Nemurin hurriedly repaired the dent in the ground and made all the stuff that had scattered about dissolve into the air before following the Alice in black.

"So it wasn't a dream that'd end with her death, huh? That's not a bad thing, but…what kinda dream is this, then?"

Before long, Alice spotted the back of the magical girl in white. Alice had been running so hard and still had never been able to catch up, but maybe now the girl in white was tired, too…or not. Alice still couldn't get any closer.

"You can do it! A little farther! Just a bit more!" Nemurin called.

The Alice in black threw out her arm, and at the point when she'd be able to touch the girl in white if she just reached a little farther, she slipped and fell forward. At this speed, even a little stumble was a disaster. She rolled, breaking trees, striking boulders, and gouging the earth, until, beaten to a pulp, she lay on her side and stopped. Nemurin looked over to see that behind them was some kind of sea turtle lumbering along. That was what she'd tripped over.

The girl was now a gruesome sight. A tree branch was stabbing through her, her right elbow joint was pointing in the wrong direction, her right foot had come off at the ankle, her right eyeball was spilling out, and her jaw was split open vertically. Nemurin covered her eyes with her hands, peeking at the scene from between her fingers.

Despite the girl's mortal wounds—actually, she looked like she was dead—the Alice in black rose up, and her torn-off foot and exposed innards were all back to normal.

"Sheesh, those are some incredible recovery powers."

The Alice in black immediately set off at a run once more.

"Hmm, that's some intense passion. Guess that's just youth?"

Restoring the broken trees and smashed rocks, and erasing the splatters of blood, Nemurin flew off, too. "But it's like…the way she keeps dying clashes with the vibe here."

They entered a wetland crowded with giant mushrooms. The girl in white bounded between the toadstools, occasionally running into them and actually bouncing off them, but she never slowed down. She bumped a particularly large one with her shoulder, causing it to sway wildly. The magical girl in white ran on through without issue, but when the Alice in black tried to follow, the mushroom swung back from the right to the left, and the giant caterpillar smoking a hookah atop it fell down.

There was a *smush* sound.

Alice was completely crushed, becoming a red stain that slowly oozed onto the ground underneath the caterpillar. The caterpillar was unperturbed by the Alice in black—in fact, it wasn't even bothered by its own fall as it breathed out a long puff of smoke. But then Alice got up, blasting away the weight atop her (in other words, the caterpillar), and it rolled head over heels. As the caterpillar tried to right itself somehow, Nemurin put it back on top of its mushroom and continued chasing after the Alice in black.

"It's really getting exhausting, fixing things for her."

Leaving the mushroom region, they emerged onto a maintained street. The magical girl in white ran right through the middle of a march of the Queen of Hearts with card girls attending her, driving the queen mad with rage at the insolent figure who had cut through her line, but the girl in white rapidly got far away. The Alice in black followed behind, leaping out in front of the angry queen, and under the queen's orders, the card girls captured the Alice in black.

"Insolent girl! Off with her head!"

The poor Alice in black had her head cut off. Blood spurted out, and the sight of her decapitation was so graphic, the execution so gruesome, that the card girl who had worked as executioner started crying, but it seemed the queen was satisfied for the moment, and the march resumed. The cards and the queen left, and Alice's abandoned body got up, picked up her head, and placed the severed parts together. With the sort of sound effect that Nemurin didn't really want to hear, the Alice in black stuck the head to her body, then ran off again.

“It just never ends with this girl, huh?”

The Alice in black continued running after the girl in white, and the girl in white dashed so quickly Alice could never catch up, never even knowing that she was being followed.

Nemurin didn’t know the name of the Alice in black. She didn’t know why she was chasing after the girl in white, and she didn’t even know what kind of relationship she had to the girl in white to begin with. All Nemurin did know was the look the Alice had on her face. She was chasing in such desperation, unable to catch up, but chasing anyway, still running even when she became a mess of fleshy chunks.

She leaped into a game of croquet and had her head crushed by a wooden mallet, leaped into a tea party and had hot water splashed over her head, but she still didn’t give up, never becoming discouraged, chasing the back of the girl she could never reach as she ran on and on. When a large rock appeared before her, she didn’t slow her pace.

“I kinda feel bad for her. Look at all this.”

Sticking up the index and middle fingers of both hands, Nemurin touched them to her forehead. “Nemurin Beam!”

The Nemurin Beam destroyed the big boulder that blocked the way before the Alice in black, and Alice went on through without crashing into it, but a bunch of fragments of the shattered boulder flew right into her, and in the end she still wound up a mess.

Nemurin moaned. “Nemurin likes cheery dreams. This isn’t cheery. It’s not heading for a happy ending. Isn’t it boring if you can never catch up, no matter how you chase and chase?”

Nemurin grabbed on to Alice from the side. “Hey, hey,” she said.

But there was no response.

“Hey, listen.”

No response.

“That magical girl in white who’s running ahead of you, she’s real, you know? Nemurin knows that girl’s name.”

The Alice in black turned toward Nemurin. Her expression held the utmost seriousness.

“Hey, hey, Alice in black. What’s your name?” Nemurin asked.

“Hardgore Alice,” the girl finally replied.

“That’s a nice name, and kind of brutal, too. Why’re you chasing that girl?”

“Um…”

“You don’t want to say?”

“No. I wanted to thank her.”

“Thank her?”

“Because she helped me before.”

“Just thank her?”

“Well…”

“It seems to Nemurin you’re rather too desperate for it to be only about a thank-you, though… Don’t you think?”

“Well…”

“This is just between you and Nemurin, okay? Won’t tell a soul. If you tell Nemurin a little something, then Nemurin can probably help you out.”

“Well…”

“Well?”

“Well…”

“Well?”

“Because…I’m wearing black.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I thought having a white magical girl with me, white and black would be pretty together… I thought we’d suit each other.”

“Okay.” Nemurin smiled brightly and gave a thumbs-up. “I like you!”

A little confused, Alice timidly bowed her head. “Thank…you.”

“You don’t need to thank me, just run. Nemurin’ll help you out and make it so you can catch up to the girl in white.”

“Catch…up… Catch up…,” Hardgore Alice muttered over and over. Each time she repeated it, she sped up. She gradually closed the distance between herself and the magical girl in white…but there was some kind of big kerfuffle ahead.

A red chess army and a white chess army were fighting on a broad, grassy plain. The Red Queen was yelling instructions like she was ready to make herself hoarse, while the White Queen was up at the front lines, battering the red pieces. It was a scene of utter confusion: A pawn chased after a knight; a bishop kicked a rook. A cloud of dust hung over it all, and there was no decent line of sight through the battle, but the magical girl in white headed for the battlefield, heedless.

Nemurin spread her arms and yelled, “Do this somewhere eeeelse!”

There was a gust of wind, and then the gust became a whirlwind, and the whirlwind became a tornado. The giant tornado swept up all the human-size chess pieces, carrying them off to some other place. The pieces all complained, and the two queens furiously ranted about how they would sue, but Nemurin didn't care. She sent them all flying out past the horizon, and without anything to get in her way, Hardgore Alice further closed the distance to the girl in white.

Then there was yet another kerfuffle happening ahead. A giant, long-clawed, sharp-fanged dragon was tangled up and entwined with a monster of the same size that was wildly smoking. The pair destroyed everything in sight as they engaged in a fierce battle. The clash between the two monsters gradually got closer, and the closer it got, the more apparent it was how giant they were and that anyone who got swept up in this—even if she was a magical girl—would not go unscathed. But despite that, the magical girl in white was headed straight for the monsters. Unflinching, Hardgore Alice also sped up.

Nemurin raised her index finger to the sky. "*Kaiju* are meant to be defeated!"

The clouds parted, and there appeared a giant alien that made the earth rumble when it landed. It kicked the dragon, punched the monster, then fired a beam upon the weakened beasts, which then popped into nothing. Satisfied at having defeated them in less than three minutes, the alien went back where it had come from.

In the smoke from the two monsters' explosions, Hardgore Alice sped up, reaching out for the magical girl in white, but she didn't quite make it—her straining fingers trembled, but she still couldn't reach.

Nemurin leaped. "Nemurin Kiiiick!"

Nemurin gave Alice a flying kick in the back, making her hand shoot forward to finally reach the back of the girl in white—and then there was a *poof* sound, and the girl in white was surrounded by smoke. Momentum sent Alice tumbling forward, and she got all covered in mud, and by the time she got up, what she held in her hands was a stuffed animal.

"Huh? What? What does this mean?" Nemurin mused.

It was a shabby white rabbit plush. The girl in white was now gone. The moment Alice caught up, the girl had transformed into the white rabbit plush. Alice held the plush animal and squeezed it

tight. She seemed far from joyful at having obtained the thing she'd been chasing—in fact, she looked lonely.

Nemurin folded her arms and tilted her head. "I wonder why this happened." She approached Alice, whose head was hanging, and tapped her shoulder. "Hey, hey, Hardgore Alice."

"…What?"

"You just said you wanted to be with the magical girl in white, didn't you?"

"…Yeah."

"But you didn't say what for."

"Yeah…I… The magical girl in white and I…" Still holding the stuffed animal, Alice looked up at the sky. "I want us to help people…like the time she helped me. I want to help people in trouble."

Nemurin gave a nod, then nodded again, slower this time. "I've got three good things to tell you."

"What good things?"

"The first is that in the real world, when you catch up to her, she won't become a stuffed animal. The second is that she's not this fast in the real world, so it'll be a little easier to catch up to her. The third is—and this is important, so play close attention—the magical girl in white's name is—"

☆ Ako Hatoda

She woke up. She'd probably been having a long dream, although she didn't remember any of it. She was soaked in sweat as if she'd just been running as fast as she could, and she was panting. She sucked in air and blew it out, over and over, for a while, and after she'd calmed herself, she got up.

She got the feeling she had been dreaming of the magical girl in white. But she couldn't remember. Ako sighed and picked up the rabbit plush by her pillow, hugging it to her chest.

Wait…where did I get this rabbit, again?

This rabbit plush was so ambiguous that she couldn't even remember where it came from, but for some reason, Ako felt like she could trust it, and squeezed it even tighter.

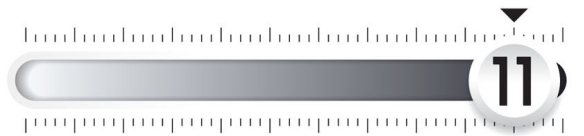
This is a new story written for this book.

It Happens from Time to Tama

This story is set a little while after Tama becomes a magical girl.

Anime

SPOILER-O-METER



Read this after watching **episode eleven** of the anime, pon!

It Happens from Time to Tama

We were forming groups of two for an independent study project at Nabuka Third Junior High. Each group would work together to study something we had an interest in, research it, and then put together a report about the process and our results. The best reports from each class would be selected, and those groups would later present their results in front of the whole student body.

A group of two is the smallest possible unit. You would inevitably be associating closely. So when we were finding partners, things were unusually tense. Nobody wanted to think about being the one person left over, and yet all the students were chattering away and laughing as if that wasn't on their minds while we divided into pairs. Back in elementary school, it was never this much of a hassle. In high school and university, I bet it's not this much of a hassle, either. I doubt you worry about this kind of thing once you're an adult. It's just middle schoolers who get butterflies in their stomachs as they worry about splitting into groups. At least I hope so.

The number was two to a group. In other words: pairs. Our so-called group of friends had six in total, including me, Chihiro Kuwata. With the six of us, we could usually manage to stay together when we got split into groups. Whether it was pairs or groups of three, with six people, you could divide things evenly. With a bigger group like four to six, they'd give you some flexibility with the number of people. If not for the bad luck of one member of the group having broken her ankle in an accident with her club and having gone to the hospital, we would have been able to make pairs like usual. That brought us down to five, meaning we couldn't make three pairs.

Everyone wore bright expressions, but they were uncomfortable. It would be embarrassing to be the one person left out. And I doubted the four who left that one out would be able to

hang out with the one left out in the same way as before. I quickly did the calculations in my head and broached the subject.

"I'll go with someone else, guys."

It was a problem if someone who was supposed to be a part of the group had to be abandoned. If I proactively stepped out, it would reduce the awkwardness, and there would be no more shame. Everyone was all like, "You don't have to do that, Chihiro," and "I'll go," but I think they were all privately relieved. I mean, I would be if I were in their position.

Right now, it was best for me to leave of my own accord. Being down to five of us friends instead of the usual six did not work in my favor. It's not like you could assign a numerical value to our hierarchy within the group, but I could get a vague sense of how it was. I was at about third or fourth. If someone was gonna get cut, it was very possible it would be me.

That was why I willingly backed out of the group. But I was a little too late.

As we were having a back-and-forth of "I'll go," "No, no, I'll go," like some bad comedy routine, most of the others in the class partnered up. Just as there was a ranking in the group, of course there was also a ranking within the class. We were around the middle. If I dragged my heels, naturally, nobody else would wait. They'd pair up without me.

Having been the one to withdraw, I didn't have the room to choose.

Throughout the term, both school hours and extracurricular time were allocated toward the independent study project. In the classroom, each group would huddle together to discuss, do research at the library, go out of the school to do surveys, or use the surveys as a pretense to skip out. My group wasn't at the research stage yet, so first we had to decide what we would do.

My provisional partner and I sat on chairs opposite each other at a desk. She was short, and I was tall. Even when we were seated, her eyes were at least a few inches below my own. Maybe that was why the distance of just one desk felt farther than it looked, and I was okay with that.

"Um… L-looking forward to working with you…"

Tama Inubouzaki. She was so bad at school that she wasn't simply the worst in the class; she could very well vie for the lowest

rank in our entire grade. She was better at athletics, but still lower than average. In the interclass jump rope competition, her foot had caught over and over, and everyone had been shooting her nasty stares until she wound up practically in tears. I've never thought *I'm really glad I'm not in that person's position* more than at that moment.

Because she didn't really have anything interesting to say and was simply a bad student who sucked at both academics and athletics, nobody needed her. She was at the lowest rank in the class, she got mocked and laughed at, but, despite that, she didn't even get mad about it. She'd simply put on her foolish, pathetic forced smile.

I hadn't wanted my own group to self-destruct over who would get knocked out. That was why I'd volunteered to leave, but I hadn't heard that I'd be doing the independent study project with Tama Inubouzaki. Regardless, I couldn't change the past. All I could do now was avoid standing out as much as possible as I made it through this predicament, nothing more.

Just enough to keep from drawing attention to myself, just enough to not make myself a laughingstock or humiliating spectacle, just enough to not hurt my reputation with teachers—all that was being asked of me here was "just enough" effort. My partner wasn't equipped for that, so I was the one forced to produce even just the bare minimum.

And producing results on this project was not the only work I was being forced to do.

Your worth is decided based on whom you associate with. Which important person said that again? I was the sole person forced to be with Tama Inubouzaki, someone no one hung out with usually. I was conscious of the gazes of the dozen-odd people who were still in the classroom. If you want to laugh and call me overly self-conscious, then laugh. I didn't want to be friendly with Tama Inubouzaki in a place where others were watching. And even if we weren't actually close, I couldn't have it seem like we were. I needed to make it look as if I didn't have any choice but to be with this lower-ranked student. Because if I got treated like her friend, as someone like her, and then from that day onward wound up being an outcast from the class as well—that would be a disaster.

"Inubouzaki."

Sure, my tone wasn't the nicest, but simply being addressed made Tama Inubouzaki tremble all over. "Y-yes?"

“Do you have any ideas for what you want to do?”

“Yeah…” She rummaged around inside her desk, and I was stunned by her unexpected answer. I’d thought for sure she’d have prepared nothing and intended to be taken by the hand and babied through this, but it seemed she’d actually brought something. The few pages of copy paper she pulled out had their corners folded over. She plucked at them with her fingertips, bending them back the other way, and handed them to me.

They were stapled together on the left side, gathered like a booklet. It was strangely sensible. I turned a page. To be blunt, her handwriting was bad. There was a weird idiosyncrasy to her penmanship that made it really hard to read, but the parts she considered important were written in red or blue. There had been a surprising amount of effort involved.

Maybe she was actually into this. But I’d heard somewhere that there’s no one more useless than a hard worker who’s incompetent. It’d be best not to get my hopes too high. I meant to skim, but as I was turning the page, my hand stopped. Written there were things like what sort of soil you should use to grow plants and conducting research by using different kinds of earth for each plant. It went on with a call to action for observing the differences in allocation of soil and drainage.

I looked up from the booklet at Tama Inubouzaki. She was trembling as if she was frightened.

This wasn’t so bad. It made me think a little better of her—just a little, as I turned another page.

That was the end of the stuff about earth and plants. Next was about researching the differences in soil by location—like mountains and oceans, upstream and downstream of rivers, residential areas and office districts, among various other places—and considering why they were different. After that was a proposal to examine the geological strata of N City and to consider what the terrain had been like in ancient times, and what had made it transform into its current state. And after that… I flipped all through the booklet. The last page was finished off with an illustration of a dog-eared girl giving a little wave, with the line “Good-bye!” in a speech bubble. Just like the handwriting, it wasn’t very good.

“Inubouzaki.”

“Y-yes?”

“Why is this all soil related?”

“Because…I like digging holes…”

I imagined a girl with no friends taking up a position alone in a corner of the schoolyard, relentlessly digging into the earth with a shovel, and the energy drained out of me. I don’t know if she was alone because she was a weirdo or if she had become a weirdo because she was alone. However, Tama Inubouzaki’s feelings toward, like, soil—or rather digging holes—were something maybe we could use.

Once we’d decided we would research changes in the strata of N City, we headed off toward the library. I wanted to search for the books we’d need before homeroom ended.

I ordered Tama Inubouzaki to grab some things that seemed useful from the natural science reference collection while I searched for some illustrated reference books on earth and strata. Our school library had nothing as fancy as a librarian. There was also no computer to use to search. We only had a library committee member stationed there at lunch and after school, so at that moment, during classes, they weren’t present. If we were going to look for books, we’d have to do it ourselves. There were other students besides us who were doing research. If we happened to need the same books and they took them away first, it’d mean more hassle for me.

I started from the section for illustrated guides, and three of the seven books weren’t there, but four were. Considering how small our school library was, those were pretty great results. I pulled out the first three books, and then the fourth, a particularly thick book, was at the end of the highest shelf. I was too short to reach. I brought over a chair and could barely touch the edge of the shelf with my fingertips, straining to somehow drag it out, but it was sandwiched in tight. I stood on my tiptoes and stretched out, grabbed the book, and slowly pulled at it—I gave it a tug, thinking, *Just a bit more*, and it came out with a pop. It came out so suddenly, my upper body fell backward, and I totally lost my balance. A few of the books that came out along with it fell down toward my face, and I reflexively closed my eyes, prepared for pain and impact, clenching my teeth…but nothing happened. I didn’t hit my back, and the books didn’t hit me in the face, either.

I timidly opened my eyelids—and was surprised to see Tama

Inubouzaki's face right there. I lifted my face, and our foreheads clunked. "Ngh," I moaned, and she cried out, too, pressing her forehead as she crouched down, shoulders trembling.

I checked all around. The illustrated books that had fallen out were on a pile on the table. The chair hadn't been knocked over. I couldn't quite understand what had just happened. I think Tama Inubouzaki had helped me. Anyway, though, I'm impressed she could save me when she has such dull athletic reflexes.

"Inubouzaki."

"Y-yes?"

"Thanks."

"Y-you're welcome." She blushed, and, touching her right hand to the back of her head, she looked down. She seemed shy. I'd thought I'd understood this girl, but I didn't really get her at all.

During our other classes, as well as during gym, Tama Inubouzaki was the same old Tama Inubouzaki. The math teacher didn't ask her any questions, treating her as if she weren't there. When we played basketball in gym class, she ran around pointlessly, shoulders heaving, never touching the ball. The teachers, the kids, nobody looked at her. I was the only one watching.

The more I watched her, the more I saw it was the same old Tama Inubouzaki. But I felt like she was different somehow. What was different, specifically? It wasn't as if she'd gotten smarter. It wasn't as if her athletic abilities had improved. What was different was her behavior, her actions. Though it didn't come with results, she was being more proactive than before.

During basketball, she'd never gotten her hands on the ball, but before, she would have stayed in a corner, pretending to move around, and never tried to come up to the front. Though it had been no use that day, she'd run around enough that she was out of breath.

I could sense some confidence there. She was still timid and hesitant, and she looked frightened even when I was just normally talking with her, but she really was different from before.

During class, while passing the ball around, while talking with friends, while cleaning, while walking to and from school, while having a bath, while cutting my Salisbury steak dinner into six pieces, while showering, while brushing my teeth, while watching

dramas, I thought about Tama Inubouzaki. At night, when I was in bed, I realized that I'd been thinking about nothing but her all day long and felt disappointed with myself, pulling my blanket over me.

The next day there was no homeroom. So we didn't have to work on the independent study project, but I'd promised Tama Inubouzaki that we would meet up after school by the library. I told myself that this was because I had no cram school that day, and because I wanted to get this study project done quickly, and though I was aware that maybe this wasn't the real reason, I decided to pretend it was. I didn't want to walk together with her, so I wouldn't take her with me on the way to the library, I'd just meet her there—that was the plan I'd decided on, like an excuse.

After school, I headed for the bench by the bike racks at the side of the library. I didn't like being made to wait, and making someone else wait is like putting yourself in their debt, and I didn't like that, either. So the whole way there, I kept checking my phone and slowing down so that I'd arrive exactly on the dot. Tama Inubouzaki was sitting alone on the bench, having a staring contest with her phone. It felt like a bother to call out to her, so I made the sound of my footsteps particularly loud, so she would notice, crunching on the gravel as I walked, but she didn't even glance up, eyes glued to her phone. It irritated me—or more like I got impatient, so I approached her without saying anything and circled behind her to take a peek at the screen. Wondering what she was doing, I saw she was playing *Magical Girl Raising Project*. It was that mobile game advertised as being completely free, so even elementary and middle school kids were all playing it. I played it, too. I hadn't known that she was into it, but it didn't come as a particular surprise. Even someone off in a corner of the classroom, totally disconnected from trends, would be on it—the game was ubiquitous.

"Oh!" She yelped, then looked up and tried to hurriedly put her phone away, but I grabbed her arm, keeping her from doing it.

I pointed at her screen, and, feeling like my voice might tremble, I asked, "Um, this magic circle mark in the level column… Are you at max level?"

"Yeah… Um, do you know *Magical Girl Raising Project*?"

"Yeah, I play it. Mind showing me your status screen?"

"S-sure."

Her dog-eared avatar seemed kind of familiar and had seriously beefy stats that belied her charming appearance. She'd maxed out her level, and on top of her already high attack, defense, and HP were additional powerful modifiers that had to be from items. Checking the equipment column, I saw it was all rare items I'd only heard about from rumors.

"The heck is this?" I asked her.

"Um…it's *Magical Girl Raising Project*."

"I know that! I'm asking why your level is this high!"

"Well…because I play a lot."

If she was "playing a lot," then I and my friends also, without question, "played a lot." But our levels weren't even half that of the dog-eared magical girl, and we didn't have any of those items, either. Since the game didn't have any paid content, playing it was just a matter of time and efficiency in completing the quests.

Then I remembered the reason the dog-eared magical girl was familiar. She looked exactly like the illustration Tama Inubouzaki had drawn on the final page of that outline she'd brought.

"Inubouzaki."

"Wh-what?"

"Do you mind…if I add you as a friend?"

"Huh? You're sure?"

After that, we got deep into a conversation about *Magical Girl Raising Project* until the sun set and things grew dark. Since it was past library closing, we decided to look for books the next day.

"How did you get your level up that high?" I asked her.

"Um…I work on it at night and stuff."

"Sleeping three hours, that sort of thing?"

"Yeah. Or, like, not sleeping."

"That's too much…"

"But everyone's playing it…"

I gave up. Moderation was best. Reaching the top in a game like this was the act of a monster, not a human, so I wouldn't see her as someone to compete with. I made up my mind to treat *Magical Girl Raising Project* as a hobby. Tama told me some little gameplay tricks and good places to grind, and at night she would accompany me on quests as I worked on leveling up and discovering items, while during the day, in addition to my usual studying and hanging out with friends, I also had to work on the study project. Not only

during homeroom, but also during free time after school, we had to gather books and put together the report.

Maybe the "plants and soil" idea would have been easier. I'd chosen the "consider the changes in the strata" idea thinking we could just make whatever kind of appropriate-sounding conjectures. But it was too late to be having those kinds of regrets. Days when I had no cram school, I used up all my time after school in the library doing research and writing.

"Did you stick those Post-its in the book for me?" I asked Tama.

"Yep, right here."

"And the memos about the characteristics of each type of soil?"

"Yep, here."

"Um… 'The taste of the soil'?"

"I tried taking a bite… Was that…bad?"

"No, maybe it's good to have something unique… Also, do you have photos of a geographic fault?"

"We have to actually go and take those…"

"Huh? We do? I thought there were a few in that book about local history."

"I don't think we can use those…probably."

This was sounding more and more like a pain in the butt. I sighed, and Tama's eyebrows turned downward apologetically.

"Agh, geez," I said. "Don't give me that look. Now you're making me feel bad, too."

"Sorry… Um, if we go there and come back quick, it won't take much time."

I cocked an eyebrow. Something felt a little off—just a little. If this had been before I'd gotten stuck being paired up with Tama Inubouzaki, before I'd ever thought about her, maybe I wouldn't have felt this way. I knew more about her now.

After considering the idea awhile, I nodded. "Okay, then let's go right away."

"Huh? Now?"

"We just have to finish this up; then we can get back to work again once we come back, right?" I stood, and Tama followed me silently. There was no heaviness in her footsteps.

Even I thought my proposal was pretty sudden, but Tama wasn't against it. And then there was how she'd said, "go there and come back quick." Considering her personality, you'd think she would say, *"If you really don't want to go, then I'll go alone,"* but she

hadn't—I got the feeling she was taking that I would go with her as a given.

Tama and I switched positions once we got to the bike racks: She went first and I followed. Tama had a plan about where, specifically, we would take pictures of the soil strata, so she must have already decided where we were going. And it seemed she was trying to take me there. Obviously she wasn't going to try to take me to someplace deserted to finish me off, so just what was this about? With 30 percent irritation and 70 percent curiosity pushing me forward, we arrived at Juzu Mountain—not Mount Meishou, or Takanami Mountain, or Funaga Mountain. It wasn't even among the prefecture's most prominent mountains—Juzu Mountain was one of the five smallest in the city, and even if we did get a photo of strata in a place like this, I figured it'd wind up being pretty sad.

"Hey, is this really a good spot?" I asked her.

"Uh-huh."

We set down our bicycles and walked, quickly arriving at the summit. It was only about as big as a playground, but since there were a lot of poisonous lacquer trees growing there, it was inappropriate even for that. It was basically just a small hill that nobody visited. There was no way there would be anything here that could be called a fault.

"So where's the fault?" I asked.

"Hold on a sec." Tama looked all around; then she pushed some of the thicket apart and beckoned to me.

"Aren't there lacquer trees around here?"

"It's okay."

What the heck could be here? Heading over where she beckoned, there, where she pointed—I looked at the ground at her feet. There was a big pile of leaves there. "What's this?"

"Hold on a sec." She moved the leaves to reveal a pile of soil, and when she moved it aside, there was the kind of metal bar cover that you'd see over a gutter…I think they're called "gratings" or something. Tama dragged aside the grating to try to get it off, and I helped her, each of us taking one end to move it to the side. That revealed a big hole.

It was about three feet in diameter, I figured. When I timidly tried peeking in from above, I saw iron pipes stuck inside lengthwise and crosswise like a grille. I couldn't see the bottom.

"I think we should be okay, but…," Tama said, "I covered the

hole so that nobody falls in by accident."

"Yeah, I get that… So what is this down here?"

"I dug it."

"Huh? Dug it? You did this? Alone?"

"Yeah… Because I like digging holes."

I pinched a pebble from the dirt that had been covering the top and dropped it into the hole. It fell between the iron pipes and quickly descended out of sight, and I couldn't hear it bounce at the bottom.

This was probably a deep hole.

"…How the heck did you do this? Did you bore it?" I asked her.

"No? I thought it was pretty interesting."

"That's not what I mean… How did you dig this hole?"

"I just dug my hardest."

I blinked, then massaged between my eyes with my right hand and peered into the hole once again. This time, I tried shining a light inside with my phone, but I still couldn't see the bottom. I turned back to Tama. She was looking at me expectantly.

"Did you really…did you really do this?" I asked.

"Uh-huh."

Should I be exasperated at her idiocy, or terrified by how crazy this is, or should I be having some other kind of reaction? Putting my hands on my knees, I looked down, blew out a deep breath, then lifted my head. *What am I thinking?* The person I had assumed was good for nothing had a fearsome talent. If someone told me to imitate this, I could never do it, and I think it would be impossible for anyone else, too. So there was just one thing I should say to her.

"Tama…you're amazing."

She broke into a brilliant smile, and I understood what she'd been hoping for. Tama had wanted to be praised. That was why she'd wanted me to come here with her. She'd wanted me to see this hole, to know how amazing it was. I put my hand on her head and mussed her hair. She smiled gladly.

"We can take pictures of strata with this hole," she said.

"Isn't it dangerous, though? I don't know how to get down there, but if you slip and fall, you'd probably die…and what if there's a gas buildup or something?"

"It's okay. I, um…I'm a pro."

I couldn't say, *"You're a middle schooler, not a pro."* She'd been digging such a deep hole, if she wasn't a pro, then who was?

“Oh yeah,” I said, “and where did you put the soil you dug up?”

“Don’t worry, I made sure to take care of it.”

She must have had some pro way to do that.

“Oh, and I got some interesting stuff,” she added.

“Interesting stuff?”

I helped Tama put the grating cover, soil, and leaves back in place, then came out from the depths of the thicket to go along a wall of earth clockwise. After walking for a little while, she stopped. She kicked a part of the wall with her foot, knocking down the earth, then took away the grating under it, revealing a tunnel.

“Do you like gratings?” I asked her.

“What’s a grating?”

“…Never mind. So then what do you have here?”

“All kinds of stuff.”

When she brought out a strangely shaped brown stone, I was so disappointed, I thought my shoulders would visibly slump. Then, seeing she had brought out another, similar sort of rock, I tilted my head, and, seeing the third rock, I noticed the rope impressions.

“Wait,” I said, “are these…pottery shards?”

What she brought out next was a palm-size rock with a pretty spiral on it—could this be one of those ammonite fossil things? Then she brought out what appeared to be a fang, maybe a dinosaur fang fossil? And then there was a fossil that looked like a thigh or some kind of bone, and more treasures came rattling on out. She finished off her collection with an armful-size ammonite. Pottery and ammonites and dinosaur fangs—it was a real mix of eras. Seeing all this, I could understand just how deeply she’d been digging.

“You…you dug all this up?”

“Yeah. They get in the way when I’m digging…but I figured they might be useful someday, so I picked them up.”

Might be useful? These were more valuable than strata or faults. “This could actually work, you know. For real.”

“Work…? What work…?”

“This is it, seriously. For real.”

“O-okay…I see. Great.”

“Yeah. Great!”

Tama seemed like she didn’t really get it, but I took her hands and smiled, and we rode our bikes back to the library.

I felt on top of the world. A story like something out of movies

or manga—a partnership I'd thought was hopeless and no good making the kind of miraculous turnaround I'd never expected—was happening in real life. The teacher, our classmates, everyone was going to be so surprised. And my friends—thinking to this point, I gasped. If Tama and I were chosen to present our results, then we would stand in front of all the students in school to talk about our research. If that happened, then what would my friends think, seeing me? What would they think of me?

Wouldn't I seem like a weirdo, getting along with the class outcast, Tama Inubouzaki? Wouldn't they be like, *"You'd rather be with her than with us, huh?"* And then when that happened, nobody in the class would talk to me, and then—I didn't even want to consider beyond that. Whenever we split into groups, whenever we were stretching in gym class, everyone would ignore me. I didn't want that.

I stopped my bicycle, and Tama, who was cycling behind, passed me by to stop about seven feet ahead, looking back at me with a confused expression. I waved at her. I didn't want her to clue in on what I was thinking that moment.

When we got back to the library, Tama and I once again hit the books. She flipped through the pages of a thick tome with an overly serious face, and, watching her, I silently tiptoed away, then ran to the bike racks and pedaled like mad the whole way home.

As soon as I got home, I fell into bed. I turned onto my back and stared at the ceiling, my thoughts nothing but negative ones. In a flash, my mood had become heavy, dark, and miserable. Futures black and sticky like tar came to mind one after another—*No, I don't want that. I don't want to wind up like that.*

I was now aware that I'd gotten carried away. An outstanding, big success would be bad. I only needed to not fail—that would be for the best. It was fine for our project to remain lost among all the others, remembered by nobody once the event was over—a project that came and went like the wind.

Excavating fossils was going too far. If I were in the position of the other students or the teachers, frankly, I'd be a little put off. The stratum research, well, that should be just about right. It seemed like Tama had never originally intended to put these fossils and stuff out in the world anyway, so if I told her to keep them secret, I doubted she'd complain.

I rolled over and picked up the phone by my pillow. The time was 5:50. I closed my eyes, squeezing them until they hurt, then opened them. My vision was now blurry. The time display had turned to 5:51.

Time was passing by without stopping. I didn't know Tama's phone number. I didn't know her email, either. I couldn't tell her that I'd had something urgent to do and I'd gone home before her. I didn't want to look at my phone anymore, so I threw it down on my pillow. The hand that had been holding it was damp with sweat. I pulled my futon over me and curled up. I couldn't have a big success. Tama's smile rose in my mind, how she'd been glad in her own uncomprehending way when I had said, "This could actually work," and I wrapped myself up in my blanket and rolled around on the bed. It was like a candy wrapper. Wrapped up in that blanket, I squirmed, suffocated. *I can't have a big success, I can't have a big success*, I chanted like a spell—and then the blanket was ripped away from me, and I flinched under the bright light.

"What are you doing?" My mom was looking down at me.

I scowled. "At least knock when you come into my room."

"No weird noises, okay?" My mom squared her shoulders and slammed the door.

The shock and sound made me jump up in bed, causing me to hit my back on the wall. Moaning in pain, I rubbed my back, and when I checked the time on the wall clock, I saw it was already six thirty. The library closed at seven. Even if I went down there, Tama would have left.

Why had I gone back alone? I'd felt unable to be around her. So I'd left her behind and gone home without a word. Tama had seemed really happy, and I'm sure I had, too. She must never have thought I would go home alone without saying anything. What sort of expression did she have when she'd found out? Had she seemed lonely, or sad, or uninterested? I thought she had surely had the same expression as always.

I rolled over in bed and looked up at the ceiling again. The cream-colored wallpaper had turned a dirty yellow from many years of being under the glare of the fluorescent lighting. I remembered saying to my parents, "Wouldn't it be better to choose a darker-colored wallpaper?" In the end, my mom had insisted on her own tastes.

I got out of bed, grabbed my phone in my right hand and my

jacket in my left, and then stood. I ran down the stairs, and, ignoring my mother's voice from behind, I leaped out the front door.

Ten after seven. The sun had set. It was past closing time for the library. There were some people around, but nobody who looked like Tama. Had she already gone home? Was she still nearby? I passed by the fountain in the central park and went through the baseball field, heading for the thicket around the back. I checked the faces of passersby, but Tama wasn't there. There were soon fewer and fewer people around. It meant less work checking, but Tama was still not there.

"Hey."

I turned to see three boys of about high school age.

"Are you talking to me?" My voice came out stiff even though I hadn't meant to respond.

The three guys were smirking. Their hair was dyed colors like brown and red. The colors of their clothing were red or green—garish. They were hitting on me. They had absolutely no business with me now. *Screw off, hitting on a middle schooler*, I thought, but my body would not cooperate with my mind. I was tense. The trio slowly approached me.

"What's up?"

"It looks like you're kinda loitering around."

"If you're bored, then why don't we go have some fun? We've got a car, so we can go to the beach. The sunset's pretty."

"Sorry, right now, I'm searching for a friend." My voice was hopelessly stiff.

"Oh, then we'll look, too."

"We'll help you out."

"Once we find your friend, let's all hang out together."

I looked around, but there was no sign of anyone else. The guys were coming closer and closer. "Sorry, I really am busy."

"If we help out, then you'll be half as busy, right?"

"Naw, there's three of us, so it'll be one-fourth."

"Wouldn't three be one-third?"

"Go back to elementary school, man."

"Sorry, I really am busy." I tried to pass by them, but one grabbed my arm.

"That's like running away."

“It’s not like we’re gonna grab you and eat you up.”

“Please, let me go,” I said.

“Don’t be like that; we can just all look together, right?”

“Yeah, yeah.”

I didn’t feel like I was getting through. But I still tried to convince them anyway, until I fell on my bottom with a thump.

I thought one of the guys had pushed me, but that wasn’t it. There was a girl in front of me, positioned like she was blocking me from the guys. She had her arms spread wide, standing in front of me, and when I tried to get up, my body was bent in half. My breath caught from the impact and the surprise, and then the shocked faces of the three guys swiftly grew distant. Once they were out of sight, we slowed down before eventually coming to a stop. I was then lowered onto the ground over the roots of a fig tree.

Looking up, I saw someone’s face. Under the shine of a streetlamp, I couldn’t see her properly because the light was behind her. But I could tell she was a girl. She had a hood with dog ears and paw gloves, and she wore polka-dot tights. She was just like the magical-girl avatar I knew.

The dog-eared girl ran off on all fours like a dog, and I watched her go, unable to even call out to her. She was smaller than I. With that build, she’d grabbed me and run off so fast that those three guys had only been able to dazedly watch us go. I remembered a certain rumor about the cell phone game *Magical Girl Raising Project*—that one in every few tens of thousands of users would become a real magical girl from playing the game.

Footsteps drew near. Still slumped on the ground, I turned toward the sound. Illuminated by the streetlamps standing at regular intervals, Tama’s face alternated between light and dark as she walked toward me.

“Are you okay, Chihiro?” she asked.

I nodded, taking the hand she offered to help me up. “… Thanks.”

“Huh? Um, but…I, um, didn’t really do anything?”

“Ah, yeah. Then I’m sorry. Sorry for disappearing without saying anything.”

“It’s fine, really. I mean, you came back.”

I looked up at the streetlamp, and the faces of all the people in my group of friends passed through my mind. Objectively speaking,

if you were to ask which of us had the nastiest personality and the most inner spite, I think it would be me. So then it'd probably be okay.

"Hey," I said.

"Wh-what?"

"Tomorrow at lunch."

"Yeah?"

"Wanna eat with me?"

"Huh…? O-okay!"

That was what I should do.

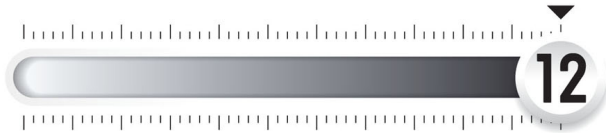
Introduce Tama. Aim to present our results for the independent study project. And if things went well, make some money off those ammonites. And then aim to accomplish what Tama had in *Magical Girl Raising Project*. If I could become a magical girl, too, she would be so surprised. Imagining the look of shock on her face made me feel so giddy, I couldn't help but smile.

This is a new story written for this book.

An Interview with Swim Swim

This story is set a while after
Swim Swim becomes a magical girl.

SPOILER-O-METER



Read this after watching **episode twelve** of the anime, pon!

An Interview with Swim Swim

—Today we have an interview with Swim Swim, a newbie magical girl of some remarkable accomplishments. It's a pleasure to have you here today, Miss Swim Swim.

"Thank you."

—So let's start off with the first question: What do you think of your magical-girl form?

"I screwed up."

—Huh?

"I screwed up."

—What do you mean…you screwed up?

"I've got too many accessories, so they often get caught on narrow doorways, and even though I've got wings, I can't fly in the sky, and I get told that I'm unbalanced 'cause I'm too big, and since my costume's white, I stand out at night, so it's hard to hide."

—That's really…a bit much, huh?

"I get that a lot."

—I see… Well, conversely, is there anything about it that you like?

"It's cute."

—Be a little more specific, if possible.

"What does *specific* mean?"

—Like, your cute hair or your cute smile.

"My cute hair and my cute smile."

—…Huh? Uh, okay. So that's what you like.

"I like it."

—I see. Right. Thank you very much for sharing that with us.

"You're welcome."

—Let's ask a new question. I suppose I should have asked the, um, more basic questions first, huh?

"Uh-huh."

—Well, then, please tell us what led to you becoming a magical

girl.

“Magical Girl Raising Project.”

—*Magical Girl Raising Project*?

“The game.”

—Right, the game.

“I was playing *Magical Girl Raising Project*, and then Fav came out, and I became a magical girl.”

—When you were playing the game, a mascot appeared and you became a magical girl… Is that what happened? Um, I get the feeling there’s…more to the story, somehow.

“I became a magical girl through *Magical Girl Raising Project*.”

—Ahh, right. Well, then, let’s talk more about that. So the reason you started *Magical Girl Raising Project* must have been an interest in magical girls, then?

“Not really.”

—Huh? You don’t like magical girls?

“I like princesses.”

—Ahh, so that’s your preference.

“There was an ad saying you could combine avatars and costumes to become a homicidal maniac or a pit babe or a potter or a princess. And that it didn’t cost money.”

—Yes, princesses are nice, aren’t they?

“Uh-huh.”

—They can be so pretty and cute, huh?

“Uh-huh, uh-huh.”

—Wait, but your costume doesn’t seem very princess-like.

“Because it’s just the game’s default avatar.”

—Ohh, I see… Huh? But you started *Magical Girl Raising Project* because you were drawn by the ad saying you could become a princess, right? So then couldn’t you make the default avatar a little more princess-like?

“There were reasons.”

—What sort of reasons would those be?

“White is a princess color, so the biggest reason I chose this is because it was the whitest option they had.”

—I see, so that’s the origin story of this unique costume’s creation.

“I also liked that it had the special effect of raising magic defense for the whole party.”

—Ahh, so you were making sure to take the gameplay into

account, huh?

"Permanent buffs are strong."

—I-is that right…? Well, then, let's move on to the next question. Could you share if there's anything you keep in mind during your regular magical girl activities?

"To obey the orders of the leader."

—The leader? Are you in a team?

"Uh-huh."

—They say that magical girls often operate alone, so it's unusual to be in a team.

"If you pool your strength together, you can defeat powerful enemies."

—I see, that's very appropriate for someone who became a magical girl through a game.

"Not really."

—Do you all get along well?

"Not really."

—What? You don't?

"Uh-uh."

—I-I see… Well, I think being able to stay together as a team even when you don't get along is actually pretty amazing. Normally teams don't work out when the members don't get along well.

"It's thanks to our leader."

—You've really been emphasizing the leader here, huh?

"Her name is Ruler."

—Huh? Is it okay for you to be bringing up her name?

"She told me to bring up her name if I got the chance."

—Ahh, okay.

"When I told her I was getting interviewed, she said I have to give her name and emphasize that we have the leader to thank."

—Ruler ordered you to do that?

"Uh-huh."

—Uh, I feel like you shouldn't say that.

"Then I won't."

—It's kind of too late now, though… What other kinds of people do you work with on your team?

"Twin angels and a dog."

—That's a combo like the last chapter of *A Dog of Flanders*. What are they like?

"They're all useless whiners."

—Uh.

“That’s what Ruler said.”

—Ohhh… Were you ordered to say that, too?

“No.”

—Then perhaps you should keep that to yourself… Please tell us what you, Swim Swim, think, not Ruler.

“They’re all nice girls.”

—That sounds like an empty compliment… Let’s try asking something else. Umm, now that you’re a real magical girl, have you experienced any change in consciousness?”

“Change in consciousness?”

—Even something minor is fine.

“Okay… My magic is to be able to go through anything.”

—Ohh, that sounds convenient.

“When I first became a magical girl, I used my magic to go through all sorts of places.”

—How nice. Sounds like fun.

“And after going through lots of places, next I figured I’d go through a mountain.”

—Oho, a mountain, huh?

“I thought it’d be fun.”

—It’s big enough it seems like it’d be a worthwhile challenge, huh?

“I swam and swam and kept on swimming through the mountain, but I couldn’t get outside. Because the mountain was way bigger than I’d thought.”

—Were you okay?

“I wasn’t okay.”

—Sorry?

“I figured going sideways through the mountain wouldn’t work, so I decided to go up. It hurt, and I wanted to breathe, but I couldn’t, and I felt dizzy, and my chest hurt, and everything went black.”

—That sounds really bad.

“I didn’t understand what happened then, so I looked it up afterward. I understood that I went unconscious. So that’s a story about a change in consciousness.”

—Uhh, that’s not what a change in consciousness means. So, then, Swim Swim, what happened? If you’re here now, then you must have survived.

“I came out in a mountain cave halfway through.”

—Ohh, that’s how. What a relief.

“I survived. I gave up trying to go through the mountain so I could get out.”

—I think that was a good idea. You shouldn’t be doing anything so dangerous.

“Uh-huh.”

—Conversely, could you tell us how your magic has been useful?

“I scared people on Halloween.”

—I see, and what else?

“One time, I figured I’d take a shortcut and went into a wall, and there was someone right close by, and I scared them.”

—I’m not sure that counts as being useful.

“I scared the people who were getting together inside the temple, and drove them out.”

—Forgive me, but if you could please give us something besides scaring people…

“I found out what going unconscious is.”

—That’s what you just talked about, isn’t it? Not that—isn’t there anything dramatic, like, say, you were able to help someone out, or had a narrow brush with death, or something?

“…I’ll try my best from now on.”

—Ahh…yes, that’s wonderful. I’ll be cheering you on.

“Thanks.”

—Let’s move on, okay? Tell us if you have any special skills aside from your magic.

“I’ve learned how to swim.”

—Ohh, swimming, because you’re Swim Swim.

“I wasn’t sure what to go with in English, so I just went with swimming.”

—It was a good choice.

“I’m also good at running. I’m the fastest in my class.”

—You’re actually quite athletic, huh?

“My punches and kicks are strong, too.”

—Oho, I see.

“When Tanaka said princesses weren’t violent, I hit him and scratched him to make him shut up.”

—I get the feeling Tanaka had a point there.

“Royalcy must learn how to fight in order to protect the nation,

such is their obdigation. That's what it said in a book. A princess is royalcy, right?"

—Well, uh, maybe that's true, but still.

"I also beat up Miyazawa when she told on me for hitting Tanaka."

—Let's not create an endless cycle of violence here.

"That's what Ruler said, too."

—Sounds like that's the first good thing Ruler has said.

"She taught me that unlike a knight or general, a princess doesn't fight directly. Sordid schemes, stratagems, and Machiavellianism in the court are the path of a princess."

—I retract my previous statement. All right, next question. Tell us if there's a magical girl you admire.

"Ruler."

—Whoa, whoa, whoa, I wasn't expecting that name to come up. I think it's pretty amazing for you to mention her after all that's been said.

"Ruler."

—Yes, I hear you.

"Ruler is a leader to be respected."

—Yes, I see. Could it be that you were also ordered to say this?

"No."

—Right, very well. I won't press the issue any further. What sorts of things do you admire about Ruler, Swim Swim?

"How she's strong and gentle and cool and cute and pretty and knows everything and teaches me anything."

—Did she tell you to say that, too…?

"No."

—Ahh, all right. Let's leave it at that.

"Also, that she's a princess."

—Is Ruler a princess?

"She's very princess."

—Very, huh. Come to think of it, you've been very into princesses all through this, haven't you, Swim Swim?

"Because they're princesses."

—You're really fixated on princesses, huh? Is there any sort of special reason?

"Ever since I was little, my mother has always read me picture books, and I liked the ones with princesses best."

—I see, I see. So it comes from picture books. So when it comes

to anime, do you prefer princesses over magical girls, too? Like *Snow White* and *Cinderella*?

"I've seen them all."

—Of course. Oh, but there are also princess magical girls. Like how Magical Daisy is the princess of the Flower Kingdom.

"Magical Daisy… I dunno that one."

—Then you've got to check it out. *Magical Daisy* is fascinating. I recommend it.

"When's it on TV?"

—The broadcast is over now, so you'd rent it on DVD…

"I can't rent it."

—Huh? Why not?

"Because I can't get a membership card."

—Well…that's a problem, huh.

"Lend me yours."

—Huh? Mine?

"Lend me yours."

—Hmm…I think the whole series is probably in the PR Department's storage, but…

"Lend me yours."

—You're a tough customer. Well, fine. Personally, I'm happy if I can make a new fan of *Magical Daisy*. I'll send it to you later.

"Thanks."

—Now, then, the last question. What is a magical girl, to you?

"Ruler."

—Ahh, yes. Ruler. Your leader.

"Uh-huh."

—Were you also ordered to say—

"Uh-uh."

—Ahh, yes, of course.

"Uh-huh."

—I wonder… This interview feels a bit more like it's shining a light on Ruler's humanity instead of yours.

"Write good things about Ruler."

—Ah, well, I'm not going to write anything too nasty about her.

"Ruler says she knows someone who's a lawyer."

—Uh, I'm really not going to write anything nasty, you know… Generally speaking, an interview with a magical girl is something you can't send out into the world unless you edit and censor some things, after all… So we'll be careful with anything about Ruler.

Mm-hmm.

"Thanks."

—Well, then, Swim Swim, one final remark, please.

"Team Ruler is recruiting new members. Experience not necessary, newbies welcome, inquire for hours of labor. Since we're magical girls, there's no pay, but our leader can help you build your skills. To all magical girls seeking a place to flourish, won't you move on to the next stage with Team Ruler?"

—I was wondering why you had a notebook. So that's what you had written there.

"Uh-huh."

—Ruler told you to advertise?

"She did."

—Good work, then.

"There's more."

—More?

"'Since this is an interview with a new magical girl, I'll yield it to Swim Swim this time; however, the most excellent magical girl, the one who should properly be interviewed, is Ruler.'"

—Ahh.

"'Next time you need an interview, contact here,' it says."

—Understood. Thank you very much for all your effort.

"It wasn't really an effort, though."

—Thank you for today, Swim Swim.

"Thank you."

◇◇◇

—Good evening, Musician of the Forest, Cranberry.

"Good evening. I've heard you're interviewing a promising new magical girl for an article for the Magical Kingdom's PR magazine."

—I am.

"That's rather odd. I oversee that girl, but I've heard nothing about your article."

—Is that right?

"Indeed it is. And also, that girl, Swim Swim, is still a magical-girl candidate and hasn't formally passed through the exams to become permanently appointed. She may have the makings of an excellent magical girl, but right now she's still merely a temporary

licensee.”

—Huh? Really?

“Yes.”

—I’m very sorry. I think there must have been a miscommunication somewhere…

“It may be that my mascot has been careless in his work. That was a close one. In any case, I shall be taking all the materials related to this interview. This project is over. I can’t have you sticking your nose in things any further. The Magical Girl Resources Department is carrying out this project in absolute secrecy… Are you listening?”

—If she’s still only a temporary licensee, then there’s no helping it, is there…? It seemed like it would make an interesting interview, though.

“And this is everything?”

—Yes, that’s everything.

“You’re not hiding anything, are you…?”

—Nothing. I’ve always been bad at hiding things.

“That’s good, then.”

—So, if I could ask just one thing…

“What is it?”

—Since the interview with the newbie was a dud, now we have some space in the magazine. So…I was thinking, why don’t we just replace it with an interview article along the lines of, “Asking the master examiner! This is what’s important in becoming a magical girl!” Anyway, Cranberry, I would love it if you… Hey, Cranberry, I’m not done! Cranberryyyyy!

Afterword

My name is Asari Endou. Thank you ever so much for your readership.

Some of you may be thinking, *Come on, man, what happened to your usual vibe? This is you and me, you can be more chill!* But this time, I chose a more formal greeting.

My reasons are twofold:

First, there's something I must apologize for. The other day, the publication date for the latest *Magical Girl Raising Project* book, *QUEENS*, was postponed. It's basically my fault. My sincerest apologies to everyone who has been looking forward to it. I'm doing my best to pursue higher quality in its writing.

And here is the second reason: The anime is in the middle of broadcast right now. And this book is a collection of short stories depicting the sixteen girls who appear in the first book, *Magical Girl Raising Project*, from various perspectives. In other words, there's no guarantee that there are no *MGRP* beginners here who were like, *"Ooh, there's a* Magical Girl Raising Project *book out! Does it have a story with my favorite character, Magicaloid [please switch "Magicaloid" out for your own favorite]? All right, I'm buyin' it!"* Now, if the beginners read the afterword and are like, *"This author is offensive. I quit this book,"* that would be bad for me. For the regulars, you may feel this is terribly overly formal, but please show mercy.

Of course, it's not as if I'm only showing consideration for new readers while giving sloppy treatment to those of you who have been supporting me since before *MGRP* got made into an anime. I've buried lots of elements all over the place, like Mary-brand land mines, just for the hardcore fans to enjoy.

For instance: *Who would have thought this was the cause of that tragedy?* Or *This is what happened after that, huh?* Or *The girl who was so cheerful and energetic in this story, she…* I've put together a whole

bunch of short stories that will be satisfying precisely because you've been reading all this time.

Also, we have the chapter that was first published in *Magical Girl Raising Project: Special Edition*, "The Lady Knight's Lonely Battle." Veteran fans have told me it might be the most sexual short story in all *MGRP* history (tentative second place: "Knight of the Day of the Offline Meetup"), and it's come back with a vengeance.

Last time I wrote a little too much, and because of the page count situation, with tears in my eyes, I was forced to cut a few things. This time it's the long-awaited director's cut. However, it's since been brought to my attention that "Your tastes are getting so old, man," and in the end, things got edited out anyway, but I am proud that through the process, the book has been improved.

To everyone in the editing department who has guided me, and to S-mura, thank you very much.

To Marui-no, thank you so much for the wonderful illustrations. The white cover with Nemurin and Swim Swim shocked me. As you said in your comment with Tama's smile: I got a sense of their lives, and I found myself quietly moved to tears. Rumor has it you're mind-bogglingly busy. Please take care of yourself.

To Yumiri Hanamori, who voices Nemurin in the anime and contributed the blurb on the cover ad, to all the voice actors who gave passionate performances as the magical girls, and to the entire anime staff, thank you so very much for making such a wonderful anime. I saw the first episode in a preview showing before it was broadcast, and it made my soul tremble, lighting a fire within me to write these short stories. I plan to invest my personal funds to buy one Blu-ray set for viewing purposes and another for family treasure purposes.

And finally, to all the readers who have purchased this book, from the bottom of my heart, thank you so much. And to those of you who started with the anime and then picked up the original novels, then later bought this short story anthology, the books from *Restart* onward are interesting, too, you know. Yes, this is an advertisement.

I'm glad there was a moment in Tama's life when she received some praise.
Dig here, Tama!!
Thank you very much!
Marui-no

MAGICAL GIRL RAISING PROJECT

TV Anime
SPECIAL REPORT

We got ourselves a sneak peek at the production of the *Magical Girl Raising Project* anime, pon! Join Fav and check it out, pon!

Your guide
Fav

Magical Girl Raising Project TV Anime

Staff

Original Work
Asari Endou
Original Illustrations: **Marui-no**
Director: **Hiroyuki Hashimoto**
Series Composition & Script: **Takao Yoshioka**
Character Design: **Yukiko Aikei**
Animation Production: **Lerche**
Production: **GENCO**

Opening theme
"Sakebe *(Shout)*" by **Manami Numakura** (FlyingDog)

Ending theme
"DREAMCATCHER" by **Nano** (FlyingDog)

Cast

Snow White: **Nao Touyama**
Ripple: **Manami Numakura**
La Pucelle: **Ayane Sakura**
Top Speed: **Yumi Uchiyama**
Calamity Mary: **Kikuko Inoue**
Nemurin: **Yumiri Hanamori**
Ruler: **Youko Hikasa**
Swim Swim: **Inori Minase**
Minael: **Risae Matsuda**
Yunael: **Satsumi Matsuda**
Tama: **Asuka Nishi**
Magicaloid 44: **Satomi Arai**
Sister Nano: **Saori Hayami**
Weiss Winterprison: **Yu Kobayashi**
Musician of the Forest, Cranberry: **Megumi Ogata**
Hardgore Alice: **Rina Hidaka**
Fav: **Kurumi Mamiya**

Magical Girl Illustrations

Snow White

Ripple

La Pucelle
Calamity Mary
Nemurin
Top Speed

Ruler
Minael & Yunael
Swim Swim

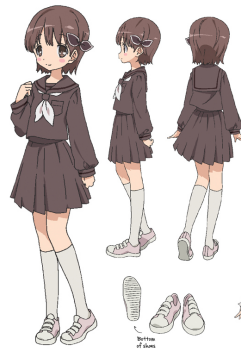
Tama
Sister Nana
Magicaloid 44
Weiss Winterprison

Musician of the Forest, Cranberry

Hardgore Alice

ANALYSIS:

Snow White



profile

Real name: **Koyuki Himekawa**
Grade: **Middle school second year**
Likes: **Family, friends, magical girls**
Dislikes: **Evil magical girls**
Magic: **Can hear the thoughts of those in need**

Koyuki Himekawa's Life

Koyuki's House

Koyuki's Room

Koyuki's Magical Phone

▲ The phone makes a heart shape when you slide it open.

Snow White's magical phone is pure white, just like her name, pon. She uses it to communicate with management and such, pon.

Cutie Healer

This magical girl anime brings back lots of memories for Koyuki, pon.

Cutie Healer (Working Title)
Cutie Affair
Cutie Vega
May need some adjusting if we include Dress Up.
Tiara-style costumes (a Hikaru x Dress?)
Dark Cutie

◀ A rough sketch that Maruino, the novel series's illustrator, drew for the anime.

Make sure to watch the *Magical Girl Raising Project* anime, pon!

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